

Imagining the Frisian Farm (or the Notable Absence of Green Cheese)

Michele Hutchison

Gearfetting

Dit artikel is de delslach fan 'e lêzing dy't ik jûn haw op 'e troch de Fryske Akademy te Ljouwert organisearre First Conference on Frisian Humanities (Second Conference on Frisian Literature) yn april 2018, it jier fan 'Ljouwert-Fryslân Kulturele Haadstêd fan Europa'. Ik beskriuw in stikmannich saken dy't it proses fan it oersetten oanbelangje út myn persoanlik eachweid as oersetter wei. It proses fan it oersetten dêr't it yn dit artikel oer giet, sieten mear heakken en oezen oan as ornaris, om't net allinne ik as oersetter dêr mei anneks wie, mar allyksa de auteur sels, in stikmannich memmetaalsprekkers fan 'e Fryske taal en in brêge-oersetting yn it Nederlânsk dy't troch de neamde memmetaalsprekkers makke wie. De blomlêzing dêr't it yn dit stik om te rêden is, hat as titel Swallows and Floating Horses: An Anthology of Frisian Literature en is besoarge troch Ernst Bruinsma, Alpita de Jong en André Looijenga (London: Francis Boutle, 2018).

The introduction to the new anthology of Frisian literature in English shortly to be published by Francis Boutle – originally titled *And Green Cheese*, which was later changed to *Swallows and Floating Horses* – reminds us that English and Frisian are historically close and both cultures are, or at least, were familiar with green cheese. In earlier times, fishermen from East Anglia knew that the language of the coastal regions on the other side of the North Sea closely resembled their own: 'Bread, butter and green cheese/ is good English and good Frieze'. And you all probably know this rhyme in Frisian: 'Bûter, brea en griene tsiis, wa't dat net sizze kin is gjin oprjochte Fries'.

Now, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell claimed that no one can understand the word cheese unless he has a non-linguistic acquaintance with cheese. In *An Enquiry into Meaning and Truth*, he describes the concept of object-words whose meaning we learn by directly acquiring an association between the word and the thing. Let me quote him:

The meaning of an object-word can only be learnt by hearing it frequently pronounced in the presence of the object. The association between

word and object is just like any other habitual association, e.g. that between sight and touch.

Suppose you are told 'there is butter in the larder, but no cheese'. Although they seem equally based upon sensible experience in the larder, the two statements 'there is butter' and 'there is not cheese' are really on a very different level. There was a definite occurrence which was seeing butter, and which might have put the word 'butter' into your mind even if you had not been thinking of butter. But there was no occurrence which could be described as 'not seeing cheese' or as 'seeing the absence of cheese'. To judge 'this is not cheese', you must have the word 'cheese', or some equivalent, in your mind already. There is a clash between what you see and the associations of the word 'cheese', and so you judge 'this is not cheese'.

And presumably it is not green cheese either. Now the Russian-American linguist, Roman Jakobson decided to take Russell to task on this. In *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation*, he refines the statement to: 'no one can understand the word cheese unless he has an acquaintance with the meaning assigned to this word in the lexical code of English.' He goes on to say:

Any representative of a cheese-less culinary culture will understand the word if they are aware it means food made of pressed curds... We never consumed ambrosia or nectar and have only a linguistic acquaintance with the words ambrosia, nectar and gods, nonetheless we understand the words and the contexts in which they may be used.

He says, 'the meaning of the words is a semiotic fact. The meaning of the word cannot be inferred from nonlinguistic acquaintance with cheddar or camembert. And pointing at the thing will not teach us whether cheese is general or specific, or any dairy product or any food.'

I'm not entirely convinced the two were in disagreement about the last bit since Russell also wrote, in the same chapter of his book:

If [a child] knows a dog called 'Caesar', he may think this word applies to all dogs. On the other hand, if he knows a dog whom he calls 'dog', he may not apply this word to any other dog. Fortunately many occurrences fit into the natural kind; in the lives of most children, anything that looks like a cat is a cat, and anything that looks like one's mother is one's mother.

With his typical sense of humor, he continues:

But for this piece of luck, learning to speak would be very difficult. It would be practically impossible if the temperature were such that most substances were gaseous.

Now what's all this got to do with my work on the Frisian anthology? Well, translation can often involve a process of visualization – you don't translate a text word for word but try to communicate the essence of the message. In descriptions, this often involves complex visualization of the thing being described, sometimes with just one word in the original, other times with terms you aren't familiar with. Sometimes I need to go from a specific term in Dutch to a general term in English, or vice versa. To cite one of my colleague David Colmer's favorite examples of this – a *broekzak* in Dutch could be a trouser pocket or a jeans pocket in English. The English like to specify trouser types: trousers or jeans or cords or chinos, whereas the Dutch are happy enough with *broek* on most occasions, and *broekzak* being a compound word makes it all the more unlikely they'd say *broekzak van zijn spijkerbroek*. To translate *broekzak* correctly you often need to guess what kind of trousers the character is most likely to be wearing. In Colmer's translations many of these instances become jeans. Australians tend to dress just as casually as the Dutch so the mental leap in his case is a small one.

Now what about when there's no direct equivalent or when the object described differs greatly in both languages. What if at the word 'cheese' all Frisians automatically imagine green cheese, all Dutch people Edam (for the sake of argument) and all English people cheddar? When, as a translator, is there room for explanation to be added and how do you do that? When do you accept that a nuance or local detail will be lost? Is it important that a reader envisions something similar to the original or not? Let's return to what Russell calls 'object-language', and combine this with some specific examples from the anthology. We can ask ourselves when is a farm not a farm?

When I was approached to do a crash course in Frisian in preparation for an anthology of Frisian literature, I had no idea what I was letting myself in for. But I jumped at the chance to learn the basics of a new language and I didn't mind that it was a little-spoken one. As a translator of primarily modern-day Dutch literature and poetry into English, I wasn't expecting to get into any historical texts. However, with three translators of modern works and only one historical specialist in the then team of translators, I found myself agreeing to take on older texts. Several of them were descriptions of farming which is unsurprising given that Friesland was built upon agriculture.

Although born in the smog of industrial Birmingham, I spent eleven years of my childhood in England's most boring county – Lincolnshire. We moved to a small village, a farming community where, in the mid-1980s, heavy horses were sometimes still used and popular ploughing matches drew crowds that judged the straightness and neatness of a furrow. There were dykes and windmills and tulips and it looked pretty much like Noord-Holland, which was unsurprising since the fens were drained and the dykes were built by the Dutch in the seventeenth century. Cornelius Vermuyden who hailed from Zeeland, drained Hatfield Chase in Lincolnshire, for example. In 1626, it was one of his first projects for Charles the First.

I drove tractors in the school holidays and helped the local milkman deliver milk door to door, which also involved close contact with local dairy farms. I knew how to milk a cow, and goats, and I knew what the inside of a milking shed looked like. But my idea of a farm was somewhat specific, it only included the farms I had seen in my life. Here you can see a typical red-brick Victorian farm building. There were lots of these, plus ugly modern extensions and sheds.



And now here's farm at cycling distance from where I live in Amsterdam-Noord.



And here's a typical Frisian farm.



One of the questions asked in the abstract was How willingly will Frisian go into English? And how does this compare to Dutch going into English?

Let's look at three of the texts.

De ade mem hjert de klok: Bauk! seit se, dou mast er oofkomme, fanke! in roppe Hidde in de feint: dan ken de aad-boer jitte wat lizzen bljou-we. Goed, seit Bauk, in wrjoutw e'r ris yn 'e eagen in strykt oer 'e reade rone wangen. Sy skouwt de gledde billen oer 'e beadsplanke, klaait har oon, in ropt Hidde in de feint. Dearmei is alles yn 't spier. De feint jout de ky eerst in lyts jeft' hea, in Hidde begint te mjoksjen. Byke, dy de hele nacht op de aad-boer syn broek lein het, rekt him uut, in de boethuusdoor uutgeande snuffelt er op it hiem om, in sieket de ongansen op. Bauk set nou fjoer oon in hinget it tjenwetter oer: mar wy matte eak wat ljocht ha, seit se, in skouwt it raam op in smyt de finsters iepen, dat se tjin 'e moerre stuitje.

from *Utfanhûs by de boer*, E. Halbertsma, 1829

Look at the underlined section. Is Byke the Frisian equivalent of Bertrand Russell's dog Caesar? No. Byke doesn't just happen to be called Byke in the same way the child's dog was called Caesar. There is a specific connotation (sheepdog). From the Dutch bridge text, as the section editor Alpita de Jong pointed out – it's not necessarily clear that Byke is a dog at all, aside from its behavior – *hy snuffelt*. One could imagine it to be a poor child at a stretch. (Incidentally, in the Dutch bridge text, the *ongansen* were replaced by the more general *eten* – food. It became 'after-birth' again in English.) I added 'Byke *the sheepdog*' to clarify the

name. Byke turned out to be a common name for a sheepdog in Frisian, just as Daisy is a common name for a cow in English. Now for something more complicated.

Original Frisian text:

It boeresté stie deun oan 'e skoalle. In steilen opkeamer wier 't noch mei in molkenkelder dêrûnder, en it griene reidskûrke, det hie der al jierren bryk efterhinge, ûnder de hege abeelje-beammen op 'e Noardwestkant. Dêr wier ek it apelhûf – it hjerstdomein fan Thae en de rige kouwerútsjes yn 'e âlde bût-hûsmûrre. Op de oare side wier't in blierder oansjen. Dêr foel de sinne oer de lichte fleartûken op bjinstap en fjûrhutte en dêr bylâns laei it iepene skoalplein, sa faken fol fen de bernewille, en it smûk bistruwelle tûn, mei it mastershûs en de skiere loads fen in skoalle yn it formidden. Ien gelok foar Thae, as er dy skoalle nou foartoan mar ris nije koe.

from *Boerke Thae*, R.P. Sybesma, 1929

Bridge translation Jetske Bilker:

Het boerenhuis stond vlak naast de school. Het was nog een hoge opkamer met daaronder een melkkelder, en het groene rieten hutje, dat had er al jaren scheef achter gehangen, onder de hoge witte abelen op de noordwestzijde. Daar was ook de appelhof – het herfstdomein van Thae - en de rij koeienraampjes in de oude stalmuur. Aan de andere kant zag het er vrolijker uit. Daar viel de zon over de lichte vliertakken op boenstoep en stookhok en daar langs lag het open schoolplein, vaak vol met het kindersplezier, en de knus begroeide tuin, met het schoolmeestershuis en de grijze loads van een school in het midden. Eén geluk voor Thae, als hij die school nu voortaan eens kon vermijden.

First draft of my English translation:

The farmhouse was right next to the school. It was still a high upstairs room with underneath it a dairy, and the green hamper, which had hung crookedly for years, under the high white poplars on the north west side. There was the apple orchard – Thae's autumn hangout – and the row of cows' windows in the old barn wall. It looked more cheerful on the other side.

There the sun fell over the pale branches of the elder tree onto the [boenstoep] and the [stookhok] and past it was the school playground, often full with childish fun and games, and the sweet little overgrown garden, with the schoolmaster's house and the grey shed of a school in the middle. It was a lucky break for Thae if he could get away with not going to that school anymore.

Here you can see the bridge text with Jetske's annotations and my English draft translation showing the parts I struggled to translate. As you can see there is less of a problem of going from Frisian to Dutch than from Dutch to English. Dutch has the words *opkamer*, *boenstoep* and *stookhok*, and *koeienraampjes* which adequately describe these features of a Frisian farm. The step from Frisian to Dutch is smaller than from Dutch to English. I am reduced to the vague-sounding upstairs room, cow's windows which sounds bizarre to say the least, and not knowing what to do with *boenstoep* and *stookhok*. I didn't even know what these things were until the translation group spent time in Wijnaldum working on the anthology together. I ended up with a more descriptive solution: 'the lean-to with the hearth' and 'onto the waterside step where the milking pails were scrubbed'.

Here's another example from the same text, *Boerke Thae*. You can see how useful Jetske's notes were to me. The words underlined are the ones I had difficulty with, particularly *hoornhout*.

Original Frisian text:

Do ynienen hearde er de klink fen de milhûsdoar troch it stadige praet hinne fen Janom en master. Stil lei syn hân op it pinkekrús mei it skraebjen fen 'e roskaem. Scoed er gau fen it stalhout stappe, né, dy klomp scoene se oer de flier hearre. Den mar spûke er him wei nei foaren ta, stiif yn 'e hoeke by 't hoarnsket. De dryste kouwesnút blies him de wasem om d' earen, mar och sa koes hold er him, hwent togearre woed er hjarren hjir net moetsje.

Bridge translation:

Toen opeens hoorde hij door het langzame praten van Oom Jan en meester heen de klink van de binnenhuisdeur*. Stil lag zijn hand op het pinkenkruis met het schrapen van de roskam. Zou hij snel van het stalhout** afstappen, nee, die klomp op

de vloer, dat zouden ze horen. Dan zou hij zich maar een weg naar voren banen, krap in de hoek bij het hoornhout***. De drieste koeiensnuit blies hem de wasem om de oren, mar o zo koest hield hij zich, want hij wilde ze hier niet met hun tweeën tegenkomen.

- * Milhûs: is de hals van de kop-hals-romp boerderij, waar ook de woonkeuken van het boerengezin was. De deur van dat middenstuk naar de koeienstal (die zit in de romp, het grootste deel van de kop-hals-rompboerderij) hoort hij dus opengaan. Ik heb het hier vertaald met binnenhuisdeur omdat dat het meest in de buurt komt als je het moet vertalen. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frisian_farmhouse
- ** Woordenboek: houten gedeelte van veestand waarop de koeien met hun achterpoten staan.
- *** Planken schot, schuin toelopend boven de koppen van de koeien.

First draft of English translation:

Then suddenly, through the slow chatter of Uncle Jan and the teacher, he heard the latch of the inside door. His hand was motionless on the yearling's crotch where he'd been scraping with the curry comb. Should he quickly step down from the ledge, no, they'd hear his clog on the floor. Then he'd make his way forwards, squeeze into the corner near the roof partition. The insolent cow's nose blew steam around his ears, but he kept a low profile, because he didn't want to run into the two of them here.

Here you can see that the translation fails to capture the exact details of the original. I had a long conversation with my colleague Susan Massotty about *stalhout* and *hoornhout* and she provided a picture book on Frisian farms, which we looked through to find examples. In the end, ledge and partition blend into the English without sounding strange (unlike those cows' windows) and we felt this was the best solution for the text to remain natural.

Now what happens when Frisians farmers move to English-speaking countries? Here's one who went to America. Funnily enough, he just uses the English word, farm.

De farm hwer't ik thús wier is meinoar in allemeugend fjild; in great treddepart bou, in lyts tredde part greide en it oare bosk. Eigentlik is sa'n farm for ien boer fiersten to great en nei myn bitinken scoenen hjir ek maklik trije of fjouwer oanslach fine, brea en jild winne kinne.

De farm waar ik mijn domicilie had, is in totaal een enorme oppervlakte; een groot derde deel landbouw, een klein derde deel grasland/weidegrond en de rest bos. Eigenlijk is zo'n farm voor één boer veel te groot en volgens mij zouden drie of vier man er ook makkelijk genoeg werk kunnen vinden, er de kost kunnen verdienen.

The farm where I had my lodgings is an enormous expanse in total; a large third part is arable farming, a small third part is meadowland and the rest is wooded. In fact a farm like this is much too large for a single famer and I think three of four men could easily find enough work here, and earn their bread and keep.

From *Friezen yn Amerika*, Sjouke de Zee 1922.

To conclude, translation can be defined as 'the process by which information and knowledge is transferred from one place to another, often being altered in the process', according to Cook & Dupré (2012, *Translating Knowledge in the Early Modern Low Countries*). Here I've shown a couple of examples of how the information and knowledge is transferred and what is lost when object-things differ culturally. Having a bridge language adds to the complication, though envisioning Frisian farms is less complicated in the Dutch language than in English. There is more convergence and less divergence. If the order were to be reversed – a translation from Frisian into English and then into Dutch, there would be greater disruption and greater losses.

In an anthology aimed at the general reader as well as the connoisseur, it was important to keep the texts compact and readable, to maintain the original style as much as possible and not add too many footnotes to the mix. Let's go back to where I started. There's actually *no* green cheese in any of the texts. There's 'cheese from sheep' in a text by Johan van Hichtum in the early seventeenth century, 'mountains of cheese' in eighteenth century Harlingen, and *soeskrakelingen* 'a kind of pastry eaten with cheese' in the Zuyderzee area of the same period.

Wikipedia tells me: ‘Green cheese is a fresh cheese that has not thoroughly dried nor aged, which is white in color and usually round in shape. The Oxford English Dictionary gives a reference from the year 1542 of the four sorts of cheese. The first sort is green cheese, which is not green by reason of color but for its newness, for the whey is not half pressed out of it yet.’

So while I’d been picturing a cheese that was green, such as this one here, I had the wrong thing in my mind the whole time anyway.

And last of all, the myth of pronouncing the rhyme to save your life in times of war is not backed up by any of the texts. In fact, in a text from 1823, by P. Scheltema, we read:

The Hollanders fled and the Saxons and Burgundians shat their cuirasses when they saw the Frisians coming; and they beat to death everyone who couldn’t say ‘*Read hird ryickt rieren lierre*’ (literally: ‘Red hard smoked heifer beef’).

From: *Levensschets Greata Watze*.

