

**The focalisation of narratives of history in A. P. Brink's *Sandkastele*:  
towards a translation.**

Jan-Louis Kruger, English, Potchefstroom University (Vaal Triangle  
Campus)

**Abstract**

In his novel *Sandkastele* [SK] (*Imaginings of Sand* [IS]<sup>1</sup>), A. P. Brink employs various narrative levels to create a contemporary perspective on a history of South Africa. Against the backdrop of the political tension of the early nineties leading up to the general election of 1994, the first person narrator is drawn into a web of stories/histories related by her dying grandmother. The resulting labyrinth of narratives presents a particularly challenging problem to the translator in terms of dealing with the proprietary relations in and around the text. In this paper I will discuss the significance of focalisation in addressing this problem by showing how an analysis of aspects related to focalisation (such as its deictic markers) can assist the translator in a rewriting of the source text.

**Introduction**

The narrative complexity of A.P.Brink's *Sandkastele* is instrumental in creating a contemporary perspective on a history of South Africa that serves both to comment on the build-up to the historical 1994 general elections in South Africa as experienced by the frame narrator, Kristien, and to provide an unconventional history of South Africa through the perspective of her grandmother, Ouma Kristina.

My main concern here is not to analyse the narrative composition of the novel in detail, but rather to comment on the significance of subtle shifts in focalisation for the translation of the text. These shifts have traditionally presented problems to translators. Rachel May (1994:34), for example, remarks that “translators, trapped in an ill-defined limbo between text and author, routinely skew the various claims on the words of a literary text, favoring the author, or implied author, at the expense of the internal voices, particularly that of the narrator”.

---

<sup>1</sup> For purposes of convenience, the following abbreviations will be used:  
SK for *Sandkastele* (1996) and IS for *Imaginings of Sand* (1997)

*Imaginings of Sand* is indeed a narrative of histories. Brink himself identifies the significance of the telling of history as follows: "The need to revisit history has both accompanied and characterised the literature of most of the great "thresholds of change" (1996b:17). He continues to say that "it is important to remember that within historiography itself there has been a move away from approaching the past as a set of "data," a "reality behind the text," toward an open-ended perception of history itself as text and as narrative" (1996:17). In the words of Kristien, the novel's narrator, "History is not an impersonal force that sweeps us along like a flood; it is as real and physical as this body, which so serenely enfolds its past selves." (IS:338) This multiplicity of history is at the heart of the novel.

Although Brink has alternated between these two approaches with an increasing emphasis on history as text in his previous novels, *Imaginings of Sand* seems to present a particularly curious mixture of the two perceptions. This is already evident in the two main narrative levels but is not limited thereto. On the first level the novel presents a narrative of history-in-the-making in the frame narrative that deals with the events leading up to the 1994 elections as seen through the eyes of Kristien. Within this frame we find Ouma Kristina's narrative of the history of their family. This second narrative level treats history primarily as text and as narrative in which Ouma Kristina's "story-spinning intermingles the intimacies of family romance with the intricacies of history" (Hopkinson, 1996:45).

Commenting on the novels of Mike Nicol, Brink says that, "by turning everything into story and thereby "dehistoricising"- and defamiliarising - known events and patterns..., Nicol restores an original violence to the reader's awareness of history" (1996b:19). This applies equally to Brink's novel as the reader is forced to view South African history from an angle that subverts and undermines the versions presented by historiographers and politicians.

Brink, who views history as being composed not only of texts but also as being "strung together from silences" (1996b:21), achieves this subversion by presenting us with a matriarchal perspective on history through the narrative of Ouma Kristina, a

perspective that is normally silenced by the patriarchal perspective. In Brink's own words,

the compulsively narrating grandmother, mouthpiece of a long line of silent and/or silenced women in South African history, no longer relies on "evidence" or "references" of any kind: her narratives are their own *raison d'être* and derive from the individual's need to insert her/himself, through storytelling, within the larger contexts of space and (historical) continuity (1996b:22).

Since focalisation can be viewed as part of the internal voices of the text, the variable focalisation in the novel contributes greatly towards presenting these silences. This also makes it an aspect of the text that has to be treated with particular care by the translator.

But before looking at the significance of focalisation to the translator, I will attempt a brief definition of focalisation. Gerard Genette in his *Narrative Discourse* (1980:186-191) introduces the term focalisation to address the confusion between "Who sees?" and "Who speaks?" and then distinguishes between three types of focalisation. The first type is that of *non-focalisation* (a somewhat confusing term that basically relates to omniscient narration, but which William Nelles (1990:369) prefers to call free focalisation). Genette's second type is termed *internal focalisation* (which basically amounts to selective omniscient narration) and the third, *external focalisation* (which is meant to designate objective narration). This distinction is mainly concerned with the degree of access the narrator has to the consciousness of a character. It is important to note, however, that "the commitment as to focalization is not necessarily steady over the whole length of a narrative" (Levenston & Sonnenschein, 1986:53).

Nelles (1990:368) defines Genette's notion of focalisation as "a *relation* between the narrator's report and the character's thoughts, to which the narrator either has no access, or has (and is limited to) access, or has (but is not limited to) access". Seymour Chatman (1986:196) introduced the term 'filter' to designate this character.

It is a much-debated point whether focalisation is merely a function of the narrator (as Genette would have it), or whether one can speak of a *focaliser* which could be a

separate narrative instance besides the narrator (a position held by Bal and taken over by Rimmon-Kennan). Although this is an important question, this paper will not be concerned with debating the issue further. Instead, I would like to focus on the markers of focalisation in a fictional narrative as well as on those "traces" and "gaps" left by focalisation that cannot be named and therefore silenced (in Derrida's terms), but that nevertheless pose a number of problems for the translator of narrative texts. But more about this later.

A number of critics have identified various markers of focalisation or viewpoint in narrative fiction. Mick Short (1996:264-79), identifies the following linguistic indicators of viewpoint:

1. Schema-oriented language; (which indicates an individual perspective within a certain code and conventions and expectations)
2. Value-laden expressions;
3. Given vs. new information;
4. Indicators of a particular character's thoughts or perceptions;
5. Deixis;
6. 'Social' deixis;
7. The sequencing and organisation of actions and events to indicate viewpoint; and
8. Ideological viewpoint.

Of these indicators, that of deixis and given vs. new information are probably the most obvious. Most of the other indicators or markers would, to my mind, constitute *traces* in the narrative that are not always easy, or even possible, to identify because they function on an implicit level, but that nevertheless play a significant role in the way the text will be interpreted.

Rachel May (1994:34-35), on the other hand, identifies the following indicators of the narrator's personal involvement in a story (personal involvement here seems to refer to any of the internal voices in the text and would thus include focalisation):

- The use of markedly colloquial language;
- Deictic expressions that locate the narrator in time and space; and
- Parentheticals or interjections that call attention to the telling or express value judgements.

May says that although these indicators are readily translatable, translators rarely incorporate them in their translations. She therefore emphasises those indicators

which force themselves upon the reader. However, she does not include the less apparent markers that complicate the task of the translator even further.

Similarly, Leveston and Sonnenschein (1986:53-54) identify four categories of textual features an author may exploit to indicate focalisation, namely:

- Register-restricted vocabulary items;
- Collocations and clichés;
- Word order; and
- Free indirect speech (in which the voice belongs to the narrator but the point-of-view to the character).

Again, these categories call attention to the more obvious markers of focalisation.

It should therefore be clear that although there are a number of techniques an author may employ to indicate focalisation, these markers are only the tip of the clichéd iceberg and even so they involve aspects of culture and language which have traditionally haunted translators. The most significant aspect seems to be that there will always be gaps or traces that cannot be filled or, put more positively, that create a myriad of possibilities to the translator. And this inevitably brings us to Deconstruction and the work of Jacques Derrida.

Derrida suggests that, in translation, one should not look at the original message or its codification, “but at the multiple forms and interconnections through which it must pass in order to speak, to refer at all”, a process which entails what he terms “a play of traces” (Gentzler, 1993:159).

His project “is one of trying to unveil ... a play of covered-up but subconsciously discernible traces without referring to some sort of deep underlying meaning” (Gentzler, 1993:160). This brings his theory into direct conflict with that of translation theorists such as Eugene Nida who posits a notion of a universal core meaning (or deep structure), derived or misappropriated from Noam Chomsky’s early theory. Although this concept has been discarded by most subsequent theories, the majority of these theories still revert to similar metaphysical notions just as binary oppositions such as faithful vs. free still plague the discipline.

I would like to postulate at this point that focalisation in narrative fiction could constitute such a “play of traces” due to the fact that it often also consists of “covered-up” traces that are discernible at a subconscious level.

The problem presented by focalisation in the translation of a narrative text would therefore lie in the fact that, for Derrida, the trace can never be presented as a phenomenon might, since it erases itself “in the act of disclosure”. It is a voice which “tells but cannot be captured, an echo disappearing as it is heard” (Gentzler, 1993:160-161).

By implication, focalisation could be seen as a play of perspectives which unveils traces of potential. In this manner, focalisation can be viewed as a tool to achieve a crossing over and consequently a focus on focalisation in the translation of narrative fiction could provide a way to explore similar traces that are covered up as the narrator speaks.

Derrida further suggests that “translation might better be viewed as one instance in which language can be seen as always in the process of modifying the original text, of deferring and displacing for ever any possibility of grasping that which the original text desired to name” (Gentzler, 1993:163). One such instance of modification in Brink's rewriting of his own text (I work on the assumption here that the Afrikaans version is in fact the original or prior text) can be found in chapter 4 of book 1 (SK:31; IS:16).

This brief chapter sees the only sustained instance in the novel where the narrator addresses the reader directly, enhancing the impression of an autobiographical style, which is juxtaposed with Ouma Kristina's storytelling. Apart from the fact that the Afrikaans version is markedly more colloquial than the English version (which provides us with a number of markers of focalisation), the latter is also an expansion of the former in that it addresses the fact that English is not the narrator's mother tongue and that she tends to formalise as a result when speaking English. This expansion significantly alters the effect created in the Afrikaans. The concluding

'warning' of the chapter, "you'll have to take me as I am" (IS:16) which is pronounced as a plea, "Vat my asseblief maar soos ek is" (SK:31) in Afrikaans (roughly meaning, 'please just take me as I am'), therefore takes on a much more ambiguous meaning in the English version. Here it refers not only to her being prejudiced, unreliable, etc, but also to the "strangeness" of the language of the narration.

The narration in this novel, apart from this sustained and some minor 'slips' to the metatextual level, mainly alternates between Kristien and her grandmother, Ouma Kristina. On the one hand Kristien acts as autodiegetic narrator of her own life and memories as well as of the events leading up to the 1994 general elections. On the other hand she acts as frame narrator for Ouma Kristina's narratives of the history of her family that are weaved through the fabric of Kristien's narrative. There is a substantial difference between the content of these two main narratives in that that of Kristien creates an autobiographical tone linked to the events of the recent past, whereas that of Ouma Kristina is clearly a fairly creative interpretation of history in which fact often becomes indistinguishable from fiction.

The extensive use of analepsis, prolepsis and paralepsis further complicates the narrative structure. Ouma Kristina's narrative becomes something of a warped chorus to that of Kristien with moments of Magical Realism and moments of sheer fabrication that simply serve to illustrate various points to Kristien. Significantly, on being reproached with "I thought you were going to tell me the truth", Ouma Kristina replies: "No. I asked you to come so I could tell you stories" (IS:114).

The passage from the novel I will focus on in the rest of this discussion (chapter 15 of part 2 - SK:153-164; IS:116-125) involves a slightly problematical narrative style. It follows directly on Ouma Kristina's account of her own history and her romantic adventure with the Jewish Jehthro in Baghdad before he is killed by Samurai (after circumcising one with his sword), and she has to escape, pregnant and on foot, through the Gobi desert. In contrast to the autodiegetic narration of the frame narrative and much of the framed narrative in which Ouma Kristina's narrative is presented as direct discourse, the initial impression here is that the chapter is

presented through heterodiegetic narration<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the markers of focalisation in the chapter create a number of problems. In spite of a few deictic markers that identify the narrator and central filter as being Kristien in an autodiegetic narrative, the greater part of the passage introduces confusing markers that would lead the reader to interpret the passage as heterodiegetic with variable focalisation.

Upon careful analysis it appears that most of Short's linguistic indicators of viewpoint, May's indicators of the narrator's personal involvement in the story, and Leveston and Sonnenschein's categories of textual features an author may exploit to indicate focalisation, are present in the text. From these it can be determined that the first part of the chapter constitutes free focalisation with the narrator appearing to be heterodiegetic. This is evident primarily from the use of names. The narrator identifies the characters from an objective perspective as "Kristina", "Louisa" and "Cornelis" instead of "Ouma", "mother" and "grandfather" as one would expect from Kristien as autodiegetic narrator and filter or "your grandfather" and your "mother" as one would expect with Ouma Kristina as homodiegetic narrator and filter.

The focalisation nonetheless appears to proceed through the character of Ouma Kristina as filter as is indicated by the value-laden expressions concerning her intentions in telling Louisa about her real father and the subsequent reference to this as a "sad mistake" and "fatal revelation" (IS:117). It is interesting that these two markers do not appear in the Afrikaans version. The first is given simply as "selfde fout" (which translates as 'same mistake') and the second does not appear at all. This obviously foregrounds the focalisation more strongly in the English version.

A shift occurs, however, when Louisa's diary is introduced as primary source for this history. Now Ouma Kristina is marked more clearly as filter through which most of the narration is focalised and we are presented with a few markers of Kristien as autodiegetic narrator with the return of phrases such as "we would have had no indication", "Ouma Kristina assured me" and "one can only hope" (IS:119). The

---

<sup>2</sup> This is by no means the only time this happens in the novel but it is nonetheless significant in that it involves the history of Kristien's mother and includes a brief panorama of South African history over the past century.



focalisation in this section of the narrative in the chapter varies between the filter of Ouma Kristina - evidenced in segments such as "one would hate to sound disparaging" (IS:120) and "Ludwig reported the whole episode, *with righteous indignation*, to Ouma Kristina" (IS:122) - and that of Louisa in accounts taken from her diary.

The most obvious of the latter markers is to be found in the description of Louisa's encounter with the stranger in Cape Town: "The mountain was invisible under its blanket, the air cool and damp, her breath puffed out in small white clouds. She was acutely depressed.... [And at the end of this encounter the stranger is described as] "disappearing into the misty day." (IS:121-122.)

The final significant shift in the chapter occurs when the narrator states: "If this were Ludwig Müller's biography, those would have been eventful years; it would have been revealing to trace the interlinking of his personal career with the larger history of the country." (IS:123). She then proceeds to do just that with Ludwig described as representative of the generation that formed the driving force behind the heyday of Apartheid.

In this *hypothetical* biography, Ludwig is utilised as *hypothetical* filtering character for a focalisation that, on the basis of its *tentative* nature, serves to undermine and subvert this perspective to an aside in the history of Ouma Louisa's matriarchy. This is signalled in the following: "There must have been the heady discovery that he was making a personal contribution by handing down verdicts in terms of an elaborate system based on nuances of skin colour or the texture of human hair or the crescent on a thumb nail" (IS:123). In fact, this ridiculing and satirising account obscures the fact that the filter through which it is focalised is in fact not Ludwig but either Kristien or Ouma Kristina as signalled in the first phrase. The patriarch is denied even this voice.

This tone is sustained throughout the account of the latter part of his life and the focalisation is marked in similar ways. The finale of this satirizing account results in a minor climax (or perhaps anti-climax depending on the perspective) in terms of the re-telling of South African history: "The private grudge which coincides with

memories of the suffering and humiliation of a people, the assiduous exploitation of the agony of mothers and children in British concentration camps, of barefoot women crossing the Drakensberg - all of this dutifully harnessed to the cause of the establishment." (IS:124.) This offhand little passage reduces the grand narrative of Afrikaner nationalism to an aside within the history of the silenced. An effect created primarily through the use of focalisation marked by clichés of the rhetoric of Afrikaner Nationalism and in the final phrase: "*dutifully harnessed to the cause of the establishment*".

This satirising tone is affirmed in the narrator's statement that "[o]f all this there is no sign in Louisa's story; it is as if she's never been there, never looked over his shoulder." (IS:124.) Ironically, her story (which constitutes a silence in that no-one but Ouma Kristina reads it and in her position as a woman in a patriarchal society) therefore silences that of Ludwig and the establishment he represents.

It is therefore clear that a number of traces exist in the subtleties of shifts in focalisation that can hardly be pinned down to specific meanings or interpretations but that nonetheless form an implicit part of the narrative that cannot be ignored or simplified without losing the regenerating power present in all shifts, traces and silences.

In conclusion, Brink calls Ouma Kristina's creative approach to history (or maybe this should rather read herstory), in which a large part of her account is pure invention, "the powerful act of appropriating the past through imaginative understanding" (1996b:22). By storifying the past in her narratives of history, she creates a "play of traces" that renders history less fixed and more of an open-ended text that depends for its survival into the future on its translation in the broadest sense of the word. An effect that is enhanced by the use of variable focalisation which inevitably compounds the possibilities of interpretation and transformation for the translator.

## **Bibliography**

- Brink, A.P. 1996a. Sandkastele. Kape Town: Human & Rousseau.  
Brink, A.P. 1997. Imaginings of Sand. London: Minerva.

- Brink, A.P. 1996b. Reinventing a continent (Revisiting history in the literature of the New South Africa: A personal testimony). *World Literature Today*, 70(1):17-23, Winter.
- Hopkinson, A. 1996. Hidden from history: Imaginings of Sand - André Brink. *New Statesman & Society*, 9(391):45-46, February 23.
- May, R. 1994. Where did the Narrator go? Towards a grammar of translation. *Slavic and East European Journal*, 38(1):33-46, Spring.
- Levenston, E.A. and Sonnenschein, G. 1986. The translation of point-of-view in fictional narrative. (In: House, J. and Blum-Kulka, S., eds. 1986. Interlingual and intercultural communication: Discourse and cognition in translation and Second Language Acquisition Studies. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag.)
- House, J. and Blum-Kulka, S., eds. 1986. Interlingual and intercultural communication: Discourse and cognition in translation and Second Language Acquisition Studies. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag.
- Nelles, W. 1990. Getting Focalization into focus. *Poetics Today*, 11(2):365-382, Summer.
- Chatman, S. 1986. Characters and narrators: Filter, center, slant, and interest-focus. *Poetics Today*, 7(2):189-204, Summer.
- Short, Mick. 1996. Exploring the language of Poems, Plays and Prose. London: Longman.