

TRANSLATION, TRANSLATORS AND ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract. Translation into and from English is admittedly part of the broader picture of globalization, the ongoing process in which a language tends to gain recognition as a universal idiom of communication. Lately, academic writing has proved to be as significant and challenging, at least as far as translation is concerned, as literary discourse and writing. The authors of the present paper start from a set of theoretical assumptions in order to check the above suggestion, turning then to empirical evidence in order to demonstrate the fact that most of the conventions and regularities commonly associated with academic writing can turn into serious challenges for the translator.

Keywords: *translation, translators, corpora research, academic writing*

1. INTRODUCTION

The authors start from the assumption that there is a generally felt need for universality in using language (in both its meanings, which French and Romanian can, incidentally, render much better, as *langue* and *langage*, and *limbă* and *limbaj*), respectively), as well as unified use of various concepts, nuances of use, etc. As far as the English language is concerned, its “universality” as a global language, has been obvious for circa 100 years.

On the other hand, **academic writing** has been found to represent the most important single field of educated communication, surpassing for instance fiction. As well as being (perceived as) a standardized, accurate, normative form of language, academic writing tends to be a more professional form of writing. As a rule, it is a form of writing employed among (and between) scholars. This kind of writing naturally requires research, in-depth analysis, summarizing, along with regular editing and proofreading. Academic writing is instrumental to, and actually underlies hundreds of topics and (sub)fields.

Turning to **translation**, we usually find various contradictory opinions as to what type of translation actually is, or should be considered, the most difficult to do. Some say it is translation in the field of fiction, i.e. literary texts, though there are actually dozens of statements, arguments and pieces of evidence to the contrary. It seems that, after all, the hardest job is to translate texts belonging to more specialized or *technical* domains (which, needless to say, are more often than not written in academic English). Both literary and academic translators are specialists in their genres or fields (or even subfields). Most translators hold

graduate degrees in literature, linguistics, but hosts of other translators are diploma-holders in some academic field related to the material they translate (physics, biology, chemistry, anthropology, computer science etc.). Before being a translator, someone who deals in translation should be an excellent writer in his/her own right, mainly on account of the fact that the style and concepts specific to both literature and academic writing tend to be quite sophisticated, complex and abstract.

2. ACADEMIC VS. LITERARY

While literary translators basically aim at achieving interlingual variants of written literature (fiction books, novels, short stories, poetry, essays, etc.), by conveying the contents of a variety of documents (also including journal articles and feature reports) in the form imposed by the specific structures of the target-language, translators of more technical texts have to face a similar set of language constraints, though the range of the texts they have to render may not look as spectacular. Most people empirically consider the job of the literary translator to be more (or, at least, essentially) *creative*: they have to produce target-language texts which faithfully convey the tone, the “voice”, the atmosphere, viz. the “style” of the source-text. More often than not, the original confronts the literary translator with such undeniable challenges such as metaphor, slang, colloquialisms and cultural allusion, for which he/she must find a suitable substitute/equivalent in the target language (and it should be added: *if* and *when* they think it appropriate). That is why the job of a literary translator may include things like working in close association with the author of the source-text (or even working in pairs), so that they may be sure they have captured the style and literary nuances as exactly as possible, or being preferred, as a mouthpiece of their own literary work, by some multilingual writers, or specializing in only one or two genres (e.g. fiction, poetry, essay, etc.), or choosing to translate only into one’s native language.

The seemingly obvious conclusion derived from most of the above considerations would be then that the “acme” of a translator’s activity is literary translation, which can even demonstrate expression skills superior to those of the respective multilingual authors! Moreover, working in pairs can include translating half of the original text, and then cross-translate the whole of the text with the other translator’s aid (“smoothing” transitions, as it were), or having the second translator act as a “reviewer” for the whole of the translated text, checking for

clarity, fluency, consistency, authenticity, stylistic adequacy and general tone.

That is not, however, entirely so – as academic translation may pose a comparable range of **problems**. Unlike literary translation, academic translation usually involves the translation of academic articles, abstracts, essays, and manuscripts: so, it may look like a much more monochord gamut. It is true that academic translators do not usually need to hold a degree in the specific field underlain by the texts they translate; nevertheless, experience is the key word in that field. Moreover, what academic translation specifically requires is a very good command of academic writing in the target language, which also includes excellent acquaintanceship with the vocabulary and general argumentative, theoretical, etc. structures of the respective specialized domain. Very much like literary translators, most academic translators choose to translate into their native language, while some academic translators restrict the range of the texts they work on to one or two authors, on account of that writer's specific style. (Our tentative assessment is not concerned with interpreters, professionally employed in academic interviews or at conferences, because their work does not deal with writing proper).

A related, and lately much debated, question is whether the majority of the translating job done by the literary translator, or that done by the academic translator is more interesting, due to the challenges and novelty each of them intrinsically contains.

Academic translation concerns rendering foreign or native variants for a wide range of articles, manuscripts, abstracts, summaries, presentations, prefaces, epitomes, etc., written in the source language. It is what is usually called specialized or technical literature, texts that are mostly used as reference sources. Academic translators are not always contacted by the very authors of the texts to be translated, but rather by various researchers who may happen to need those texts as primary sources of information.

3. SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

Our first debatable issue in discussing the potentialities and specificity of academic translations: what does translating specialized text mean? Markel (1998) defined such type of writing as “writing about a technical subject, intended to convey specific information to a specific audience for a specific purpose” [1], so we actually talk about technical writing *and* academic writing rolled into one. Thus, it represents a useful, most welcome component of a translator's very training, making up for the variety of language characteristics reality actually faces one with. Familiarity with several genres will felicitously equip the future specialist in translating texts written in specific fields of language with the necessary skills to generate (and replicate) texts consistent with those genres.

Many researchers in the field of translation have noticed a relative lack of interest in the (mainly theoretical) issues involved by translating academic discourse, especially translating technical and scientific material, e.g. Franco Aixelá [2] and Sarukkai [3]. As a rule, translating academic discourse has tended to be seen as less important, marginal, less frequently

addressed, or devoid of essential difficulty. However, reality itself demonstrates that translating academic texts occurs quite frequently, and its importance can hardly be underestimated. For instance, most scientific journals belonging to the non-English-speaking world impose, as an absolute prerequisite for publication, writing in English (or else, abstracts written in two languages), as do numerous university departments for thesis and dissertation abstracts or CVs, and the journals that publish translated versions of the papers included are by no means infrequent. On the other hand, there is almost unanimity of views as to the complexity and multifariousness of academic translation, including translation challenges that ranging from specific conventions and structures, technical terminology and genre conventions to subtler cultural issues.

One of the foremost challenges facing translators busy in the field of academic translation is generated by the (apparent) paradox that academic discourse seems to be at once both **universal** (arising, as it does, from the very universality of science) and **variable** (as it is steeped in particular cultural traditions, thus generating noticeable, sometimes even daunting, variation): Mauranen (1993) [4].

Major differences have been noticed by various studies in contrastive rhetoric, mainly in so far as the conventions of academic writing in different languages are concerned, so it is but natural to take heed of, and capitalize on such (practical and theoretical) knowledge in the field under consideration – translation studies. Academic translation can, consequently, be highly different in various cultures. Thus, there are researchers who convincingly note that academic writing is dissimilar in different languages, and should be treated as such: “the discourse of science in our global world is still highly cultural both in its textual structures or sequencing and in its cognitive processes” [5, p. 105].

The logically enough conclusion is that (good, authentic) translation, be it in the rather specialized field of academic discourse, should adhere to (most) conventions imposed by the target language. This should be “optimum adherence to the stylistic norms of the target language” – [6, pp. 144–145], or at least a fair compromise between preservation and adaptation [7, p. 127].

4. SPECIFIC ISSUES

As already mentioned, translating academic discourse involves a broad range of complex issues arising at different levels. The respective gamut extends from the general approach or translation strategy used by the translator to issues involving a particular text, or even its constituent linguistic or textual features. In translations of technical proper, economic, legal, art, didactic, etc. texts (i.e. translation for specific purposes), the permanent interplay the translator establishes between the text in its entirety and its components must include an intrinsic analysis of, and reflection on, the particular style of the material, which more often than not is likely to characterize the writer himself/herself of the text. So, there is a need for the holistic approach to translating academic discourse, not only at a purely theoretical level, but also as a matter of practical action. In this

respect, a much needed complement to the theory in the domain can be provided by various sets of data acquired through attentively exploring and studying the particular issues typical of academic translation.

If we turn to the topic of the language material to be taught, we can find (and research has proved) that different languages exhibit substantial dissimilarities as far as the conventions of academic discourse are concerned. Many studies in the past sought to illustrate the sheer variety of the subdomains in which languages differ when it comes to written discourse, mainly in the technical field: lexicon and word-formation items and rules, use and prevalence of various grammatical categories, syntactic structures, word order, discourse conventions, general style, parts of the standard discourse frame, etc. Among the widely different (standard) make-up conventions count the wording of the abstract, the thesis statement, the demonstrations, and the conclusions.

5. THE NEED FOR CORPORA RESEARCH

We are not trying to analyze massive corpora of research articles, which would be the object of a much more in-depth endeavour. That would involve comparing Romanian originals with their English translations, analyzing the English originals in terms of abstract or thesis statement use, etc. and general form conventions. Anyway, the results of such studies that we could come by clearly demonstrate that, for instance, the thesis statement is used more frequently in original English research articles than in original Romanian research articles, and that the English translations of the latter by and large correspond to the Romanian originals. The results also reveal differences between the two sets of originals in terms of thesis statement position and the degree of authorial presence, again with the English translations corresponding to the Romanian originals. A comparison of the Romanian originals and their English translations could identify certain changes (or adaptations) made during translation. Similar findings suggest that the differences between the two languages in point of thesis-statement (or abstract wording), in both use and form, can create (sometimes serious) problems in translation.

So, one of the conventions in which languages may differ is the use of the thesis statement. The thesis statement is a sentence (or, less frequently, a string of sentences), generally appearing at the end of the introductory section of the paper, stating the main idea or principal goals of the paper. Its direct purpose is to facilitate the reading of the text. Although the term itself is used chiefly in the context of essay writing for teaching first-, second-, and foreign-language writing, it is sometimes used in reference to other genres. In this paper it is used in the context of academic writing, typically referring to research articles. Though it has long been recognized as a convention of English academic discourse and is presented as an important feature in most EAP (i.e. *Employee Assistance Program*) textbooks, not many studies concerning expressing and translating thesis statement in Romanian academic writing have been produced: so, its very status seems to be highly unclear, at least in Romanian academic writing. Accordingly, it has been suggested that Romanian

academic writing is not as writer responsible as English academic writing is.

The corpora that an undertaking of the analytical kind mentioned before (which could be the outset of a broader future study) should make use of, ought to include highly representative material – for the occurrences of thesis statement (or abstract, as may be the case). Anyway, the respective corpus should ideally include some 100 units (namely, texts published preferably between 1999 and 2012), in articles illustrative of one field of research, and advisably subdivided into three sub-corpora, which should consist of an equal number of Romanian articles and, respectively, English translations corresponding to those materials.

The thoroughgoing analysis that has to be conducted on that material must consist of identifying instances of thesis statements (or abstracts), according to the general criteria of identification. Then, a comparison of the three sub-corpora should be carried out in terms of thesis statement (or abstract) frequency, the position of the thesis-statement within the introduction, and the degree of authorial involvement as expressed in its form. The final stage of analysis lies in the examination proper of the Romanian originals and their English translations. The degree of correspondence in thesis-statement (or abstract) use and form will be noted for each original and translation pair, which will generate a final correspondence table.

The results of such a thorough analysis will concern the degree of explicit authorial involvement in the thesis statement, the extent to which the general convention of the genre were observed by the translators, and more importantly, the degree of correspondence between the Romanian texts and their English translations.

The findings of the analysis will certainly confirm the hypothesis of the said research endeavour: there are in fact substantial differences in the frequency of thesis-statement use in the Romanian originals and English originals. This difference, however, cannot be said to be reflected in the English translations of the Romanian originals. Differences are also to be noticed between the two sets of originals in terms of position and form: in both respects, the English translations tend to correspond to the Romanian originals. A further comparison of the thesis statements that can be identified in the Romanian originals and their English translations could demonstrate that literal translation tends to be used, possibly in half of the cases, and changes which could generally be described as improvements in terms of TL conventions could be observed in some other instances.

The interpretation of the analysis based on similar research can prove, be it indirectly, a set of characteristics of academic translation in Romanian. Consequently, it can be argued that Romanian academic writing is in general a bit less reader-oriented than English academic writing (since thesis statement can be interpreted as an aspect of reader-oriented writing), and is most probably in keeping with its own conventions, typical of this genre in Romanian. This suggests that complex issues may arise in translating academic discourse between the two languages, which are as many challenges for both professionals and non-professional translators: the differences in rhetorical

conventions may lead to translations which fail to conform to TL conventions.

And, indeed, there are numerous challenges for translators in the academic field: the Anglo-American originals generally tend to be more metaphoric in expression, and even more colloquial. Consequently, one has to find appropriate academic equivalents in one's own language (i.e. the target language)... and the other way round (when it comes to translating from Romanian into English, which is, in actual practice, the far more frequent case).

6. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND INSTANCES

Both systematic observation and empirical experience has shown us that there is no one-to-one relationship between what can be considered "academic" (and/or formal) in English and Romanian. To take a very simple example, we can compare Romanian terms and phrases like *a executa*, *a realiza*, *a constitui*, *a întreprinde*, *relativ / privitor la*, *comparative cu*, etc. (which tend to be more neologistic and a bit more "formal") with their respective English counterparts: *to do*, *to make*, *to be*, *to carry out*, *about/on*, *unlike*, etc. This basically means possessing, or acquiring, the much needed "common sense" in matters of translation and adaptation (and equivalence).

It is definitely a truism to say that translation (any kind of translation, not only the academic kind) should avoid erroneous comprehension of the target text (which should naturally include Romanian terms such as the famous adverb *respectiv* – normally and canonically meaning "respectively", but very often misused to mean "that is" or "i.e."); in the context, however, the most significant components of the translated sequence are, of course, the (highly) specialized – or *technical* – terms and phrases.

A standard, rather general but well-established observation concerning the typical challenges in academic and formal writing shows that, as a rule, the most common such "quirks" are: the use of the Passive voice, the group of the Subject and its inherent problems (e.g. the author's plural, the use of the impersonal, etc.), the use of the tenses, word order, the various syntactic objects, a.s.o. Thus, academic and technical texts written in English, unlike their Romanian versions, will abound in structures like *Experiments were conducted which...*, *attentively processing the research material...*, *There are such cases when...*, etc.

Further conclusions can be derived from a (somewhat simplistic, unscientific, if not rather naïve, we have to admit) experiment: employing the often used possibility of having recourse to translating "engines" (with their advantages, and mainly shortcomings...), such as *Google Translate* or *Babel*. Our personal findings tend to demonstrate that such databases, if suitable used and especially refined, within various contexts, can generate surprisingly good results. The main finding was that, anyway, English is, more often than not, "simpler" or "more unassuming" (we could not bring ourselves to using the word *simpler*, though) in point of expression, e.g. Romanian "în cadrul", "în contextul" are simply translated as "in"; or (*animale*) *poichiloterme* and *exoschelet* become *cold-blooded (animals)* and *outer skeleton*, etc.

Most Romanian polysemous neological terms are prone to serious difficulties and (various degrees of) speciousness in the field of Anglo-Romanian translation. There are, for instance, (otherwise good) translators who, correctly (but somewhat obsessively) render English words that do not count as "genuinely specialized" terms – at least as far as their form is concerned – which occur in clearly "technical / specialized" contexts, through terms whose make-up or aspect has a **technical** (occasionally, rather unwieldy) tinge, based on "learned" segments / combining forms, such as *anthropo-* in *anthropology* and *anthropomorph*, and *pal(a)eo-* / *pal(a)e-* in *palaeobotany* or *palaeography*. For instance, the word *arheoscheletologie* was used in a context where the film character whose words were being reported was simply *interested in old bones*; similarly, Eng. *warm-blooded* was rendered as *homeoterm* (instead of Rom. "cu sânge cald"), while *cold-blooded* was translated as *poichiloterm* – cf. Eng. *homoiothermic* / *homothermal* "having a constant body temperature, usually higher than the temperature of the surroundings; warm-blooded" and *poikilothermic* / *poikilothermal* "(of all animals except birds and mammals) having a body temperature that varies with the temperature of the surroundings" (COLL). Similarly, *grass-eating (animal)* was rendered as (*animal*) *erbivor*, and *carrion-eating (animals)* as (*animale*) *necrofag*. See also Eng. *weightlessness*, a lexically and semantically "transparent" or "compositional" term, vs. Rom. *imponderabilitate*.

Here are some other examples of such non-neologistic, non-Romance, more concrete translation equivalents, which have the advantage of being much more frequent, e.g. "*modificările survenite în cadrul politicilor guvernamentale*" ↔ "*the changes in government policies*"; "deoarece acestea satisfac nevoi de bază ale oamenilor" ↔ "because they *meet* people's basic needs"; "*se disting două categorii de servicii de interes general*" ↔ "*there are two categories of services of general interest*"; "*strategia europeană în domeniul serviciilor de interes economic general*" ↔ "*the European strategy for services of general economic interest*"; "...sau le-ar furniza în alte condiții" ↔ "...or would provide them *otherwise*"; "furnizorii de servicii de acest tip" ↔ "...providers of *such* services"; "are o serie de drepturi privind prestarea serviciilor din acest domeniu" ↔ "has a number of rights *regarding services* in this area"; "...printre profesorii din instituțiile de învățământ liceal" ↔ "investigated among the *teachers in high schools*"; "în cazul unor valori mai mari" ↔ "and *for higher values*"; "e situată la limita..." ↔ "...*is close to the limit*..."; "...în sensul unei populații..." ↔ "*meaning a population*..."; "De aici rezultă că..." ↔ "It *follows* that..."; "...sprijină substanțial ideea conform căreia..." ↔ "...*substantially supports the idea that*..."; "*procesul educațional*" ↔ "education", etc.

A kind of rule of thumb of Romanian-English (academic) translation is that the Romanian variant tends to be longer (compare, for instance: "Rezultatele obținute prin cercetarea statistică și discuțiile legate de acestea" and "The results obtained by statistical research and related discussions"; "Acest lucru este ușor exemplificabil" cf. "This is easy to illustrate / This is easily illustrated..."; "...opinion that the quality of vision and perspective is essential" cf. "în zona opiniei conform căreia

experiența managerială...”; “...the changing needs and expectations of users” cf. “evoluția necesităților și a așteptărilor utilizatorilor”; “...the opinions of the teachers-managers differ from the opinions of the teachers (exclusively) on both the decision and the management of...” cf. “...diferă de opiniile profesorilor (exclusiv) referitoare atât la decizia, cât și...” [on is used to indicate the basis, grounds, or cause, as of a statement or action: *I have it on good authority*]; “Obiectivul cercetării axate pe chestionare ... l-a constituit...” cf. “the aim / target... was...”, etc. (However, it would be useful to compare the Romanian terms *obiectiv* and *țintă* in various specialized and academic contexts, e.g. “*Obiectivul cercetării axate pe chestionare*” cf. “*Ținta acestei cercetări aplicative este aceea de a demonstra că...*”).

7. CONCLUSIONS

Therefore, a tentative, situation-based conclusion may be drawn that English is (or at least seems to be) a ‘no-nonsense’, pragmatic language, which makes use of simpler, more transparent / analyzable / “compositional” structures instead of longer, ‘learned’, ‘opaque’, ‘un-etymological’ variants. On the other hand, if academic writing in Romanian tends to be a lot more “neologistic” than its English counterpart, the latter is more often than not rather neologistic as far as some specialized or technical terms and structures of set phrases are concerned.

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