

Negative Transfer in the Translation of Scientific Discourse

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse the translated abstracts from French to English of some volumes of the journal JAM (Journal Algérien de Médecine) for the purpose of detecting the transfer errors which occur at the lexico- grammatical level. This negative transfer in translation is due to an insufficient knowledge, in the target language, of the appropriate terminological register on the one hand and more particularly due to the non- application of the rules which generally govern scientific discourse on the other. The present account aims therefore to show that these requirements which characterize the scientific text vary from language to language and can be handled through various linguistic approaches to translator training courses.

The present account tackles the issue of language transfer and more specifically negative transfer which, till now, remains a central but controversial issue in applied linguistic studies particularly in the fields of foreign language teaching and translation. Transfer has become a general phenomenon as it inevitably takes place in all situations of languages in contact, i.e., situations where speakers, hearers, writers and readers handle more than one language. Therefore, the influence of one language upon the other occurs in all language productions and receptions and at all levels of

linguistic description. When this influence does not cause any distortion in the target language production but rather facilitates its translation and interpretation, transfer is said to be positive. On the other hand, when this influence causes mistranslations and misinterpretations, transfer is said to be negative and thus synonymous with interference. The present paper is therefore concerned with this second aspect of cross-language influence, i.e., negative transfer or interference in the translated abstracts from French to English of some selected articles published in the Algerian Journal of Medicine JAM (Journal Algérien de médecine).

It is well known to linguists and researchers in general that writing an abstract even in the language in which the whole paper has been written is, in itself, not an easy matter. Translating it is a much more complex task. An abstract is a specific piece of discourse in terms of length, content, form, coherence and cohesion, hence Swales (1990) considers the abstract as one of the “ **research- process genres**” and specifies (*ibid.*, p. 181) that:

Abstracts continue to remain a neglected field among discourse analysts. This is unfortunate as they are texts particularly suited to genre investigation. Moreover, study of certain types of abstracts can potentially be highly revealing of disciplinary discourse communities.

The abstract, being itself a ‘**genre**’ or a characteristic piece of discourse is therefore a difficult linguistic exercise at the monolingual level and a much more complex one at the interlingual level where a lot of other considerations of a micro and macro-linguistic nature enter into play in converting this piece of text or succinct summary from one language to another. In such a case, the converted or translated abstract constitutes, for the target language audience, the only piece of information about the research article. Therefore, it must satisfactorily render the source language text and at the same

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time be in conformity with the target language norms to prevent misunderstandings, misinterpretations, in short, avoid misleading in the transmission of a given content and also breakdowns in communication. This is exactly what is expected from academics and researchers as is the case here with the authors of the JAM articles who are required to provide their papers with abstracts in English. However, the provided translated abstracts, most of the time, are far from meeting the linguistic requirements of the register in question (here the medical register) and of the research- process genre itself (here the abstract). This situation is similar to the one of Spanish academics described by Bloor (1984) and reported by Swales (op. cit., p. 179) in what follows:

Many felt unequal to this task and resorted to translation services available in the city, while continuing to express anxiety about both the linguistic and substantive accuracy of those translations.

These feelings are quite justified in view of the numerous divergences from target language norms we found in the following extracts from the JAM abstracts in English. In the context of a paper such as the present one which must obey time and space constraints, we can give only some illustrative samples which are presented and discussed below in terms of the linguistic level at which the deviations in question occur and in terms of their semantic specificity following Odlin's (2000) distinction of errors as underproductions, overproductions, productions and finally misinterpretations. In the case of the data under concern here, this will lead to undertranslations, overtranslations and mistranslations which, in turn, vary in number and type. For convenience purposes and since all these types of negative transfer occur, most of the time, within the same extract, the data are examined and discussed separately. From now onwards, we will use in the

examples the abbreviations SL for the source language (French) and TL for the target language (English). Consider:

1- **a.** SL: “ Les surdités professionnelles dues à l’exposition au bruit viennent au premier rang des maladies professionnelles. ”

- **b.** TL: “ Occupational deafnesses due to the exposure to noise are essentially occupational diseases. ”

As can be observed, there is an overt error of underproduction here which leads to undertranslation since the corresponding target language structure for ‘**viennent au premier rang**’ (come in or take the first position) has not been produced at all and instead, the translator has given a redundant information, i.e., a pure repetition of what is already expressed in the first clause. On the other hand, the following extracts illustrate a case of overproduction or overtranslation whose occurrence seems to be tied up with the literal translation of a redundant information:

2. - **a.** SL: “ L’exposition à des ambiances sonores excessives dans de nombreux secteurs d’activité est à l’origine de cette situation. ”

- **b.** TL: “ This situation is due to the exposure of excessive noise atmosphere in several fields of activity is in the beginning of this situation. ”

As explained earlier, the translator here has tried as much as possible to give, in the target language, a structure which is comparable in form and meaning to the SL structure as can be observed with ‘**is in the beginning of this situation**’ and ‘**est à l’origine de cette situation**’ respectively. In doing so, he not only confused between the meanings of the French word ‘**origine**’ but also produced a structure whose content has already been rendered in the first clause which would have constituted an acceptable translation without the confusion of ‘**to**’ with ‘**of**’ after the word ‘**exposure**’.

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The following translated pieces, however, reveal different types of production errors due to substitution but at various levels:

3. - a. SL: “ Elle a permis d’identifier les éléments d’insatisfaction décrivant l’organisation actuelle. ”

- **b.** TL: “ It has abled to identify the dissatisfaction elements which describe the present organization.”

As can be observed, the substitution of ‘**able**’ for ‘**enable**’ here is not a case of negative transfer but rather an intra-lingual error based on morphological association or similar form of words of the same language. On the other hand, morphological substitution at the inter-lingual level, i.e., across languages can sometimes lead to a high degree of error gravity as in the following instances:

4. - a. SL: “ L’administration orale ou parentérale d’un médicament”

- **b.** TL: “ Oral or parental application of a drug”

The translator here has made a morphological association of two lexical items substituting therefore ‘**parental**’ for the technical term ‘**parentérale**’. The result of this interlingual morphological substitution is a transfer error which leads to total confusion and lack of transmission of the appropriate explanation or instruction.

At the syntactic level, cases of complete alteration of structure are numerous and generally result from the attempt to produce formal or literal translation as in the following:

5. - a. SL: “ L’auteur retrace les différentes attitudes thérapeutiques que doit observer le médecin face à l’urgence psychiatrique. ”

- **b.** TL: “ The author recalls the different therapeutic attitudes which must a doctor observe facing psychiatric emergency.”

In the target language version, the second clause is structured in a way which is ambiguous and strange to the

genre under concern here and the whole sequence does not even correspond to what is generally and naturally said in the target language under the circumstances. In the subordinate clause, the verbal group follows an interrogative pattern instead of the statement form and the conjunction ‘**when**’ before ‘**facing**’ has been omitted resulting in an alteration of the pragmatic aspect of the whole context in terms of time and tense relationships. Furthermore, the requirements of the scientific register in general, the conventions of the scientific discourse and the grammatical features and patterns favoured by this specific genre such as prevalence of the passive voice, the use of the present tense and so on are not always found wherever appropriate as is the case here with **4.b** and even others in which the target language version does not emphasize what is expected as Luzon- Marco (2000, p. 66) puts it : “ Passive structures are used with the purpose of emphasizing the entities studied, and not the researcher’s actions.”

Cross- linguistic interference due to a strong degree of formal or word- for- word translation can also be easily identified in the following strings:

6. - a. SL: “ Le médecin généraliste nécessite une place importante dans le management quotidien de l’urgence psychiatrique. ”

- **b.** TL: “General practitioner needs an important position in the daily management of psychiatric emergency.”

In addition to the omission of the definite article before the noun phrase functioning as subject in the target language piece of discourse, there is a concrete or straightforward case of negative transfer which is commonly referred to as ‘**calque**’ since the resulting translation of the verb+ object structure here reflects very closely the source language verb phrase structure thus causing a serious misleading in the understanding of the statement in question or misinterpretation

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since what happens is exactly what Odlin (op. cit., p. 38) explains as follows:

Native language structures can influence the interpretation of target language structures and sometimes that influence leads to learners inferring something very different from what speakers of the target language would infer.

In fact, from such a translation, target language speakers may not infer that **‘the general practitioner plays a very important role in the daily management of psychiatric emergency’**, the only source meaning which the translated sentence is supposed to render.

The following example, however, is a mistranslation which is due to a total misunderstanding at the source language level itself resulting in the confusion between the subject and the agent in the target language version where the agent is interpreted as the entity which undergoes the action as illustrated below:

7. - a. SL: “Les auteurs passent en revue l’utilisation courante des médicaments.”

- b. TL: “The authors are reviewed the current use of drugs.”

Other straightforward cases of negative transfer which have to do with the restricted combinations or characteristic co-occurrences of words and expressions and which are commonly referred to as collocations or with the current and more general linguistic term of phraseology can be exemplified in the context of the data under concern with:

8. - a. SL: “Passage transnasal”

- b. TL: “Transnasal Passage”

The above combinations show that the translator has just made a change in the word-order without producing the more idiomatic expression of **‘transnasal route’**, i.e., almost a conventional expression or formulation specific to the medical

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register but whose omission, in this particular context, does not affect the transmission of the message. However, in other contexts, the non-familiarity with the collocational expression or appropriate phraseology in the target language may result in misinterpretation and mistranslation as in the following instances:

9. - a. SL: “déclassement professionnel”

- b. TL: “occupational change of class”

where ‘**déclassement**’ is reduced simply to ‘**change**’ and the source meaning of ‘**loss in professional status or rank**’ is not rendered. Therefore, the translator has to take into account the semantic specificities expressed in typical occurrences associated with specific registers as Xatara (2002, p. 442) puts it:

En fait, outre l’obligation de connaître presque toute la grammaire et une tranche assez raisonnable du lexique, il est fondamental que le traducteur puisse se servir d’un grand répertoire de formes figées.

In almost all the selected samples discussed so far, the problems encountered seem to occur more at the level of lexico-grammatical combinations or what has been described earlier as phraseological combinations than at the level of the terminological component of the register itself. Unfortunately such combinations are rarely dealt with, if not at all, in specialized bilingual dictionaries which generally constitute the immediate reference material the translator turns to, hence awareness to phraseology becomes a basic requirement for dictionary-making as pointed out by Humbley (2000, p. 96) in what follows:

Cette prise de conscience était provoquée par l’intervention de très nombreux traducteurs qui reprochaient aux dictionnaires de spécialité et aux banques de terminologie de limiter les informations aux termes et à leur description

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conceptuelle et de passer sous- silence tous les problèmes liés à la mise en discours.

Conclusion

The selected corpus for study has shed light on the most significant aspects of language transfer in the translation of specialized texts. These aspects can be handled through rigorous approaches to translator training courses which, on this basis, will be designed specifically for students in order to provide them with the collocational frameworks and syntactic patterns necessary for the interpretation and translation of specific registers within the more general type of scientific discourse. To conclude, we can say that on a pure pragmatic basis, the main objectives of such courses, as stated by Elquasem (2003, p. 78), must be:

Sensibiliser les étudiants au fait que le but d'un texte spécialisé est de transmettre une information sur une technique, une maladie, un phénomène et d'être exploitable par les spécialistes et le grand public... Sensibiliser l'étudiant à la recherche documentaire ponctuelle pour mieux maîtriser certaines contraintes lexicales, telles que les collocations, les co-occurrences et la phraséologie spécialisée.

Références

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