ROMANIAN JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDIES
RJES 20 /2023

sciendo

DOI: 10.2478/rjes-2023-0014

PROBLEMS OF LEXICAL AND GRAMMATICAL EQUIVALENCE IN TRANSLATION: A DIDACTIC APPROACH

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Abstract*: Even if translation competence is not restricted to the knowledge of the two languages in contact, it is obvious that the quality of a translated text depends to a great extent on the appropriate use of the target language lexical items and combinations of items as imposed by the communicative context, on the one hand, and on the correct application of the rules specific to the grammatical system of that language, on the other. Considering both theoretical and research evidence, the authors of this paper discuss the problems that advanced students in English encounter when trying to achieve lexical and grammatical equivalence in the case of various types of texts translated from English into Romanian.*
Keywords: *equivalence, translation errors, translation problems, translation teaching*

1. Introduction

The present study has its roots in the two authors' long experience as English teachers in the programme of Applied Modern Languages in the West University of Timișoara, Romania, a programme which is basically meant to prepare students for a potential career as translators. More specifically, we have often been surprised to notice that students who are in the last year of their bachelor's degree program, and who are considered to be proficient users of the English language sometimes make serious lexical and grammatical errors when translating not only into English, but also into their native language. We strongly believe that failure to achieve translation equivalence at lexical and grammatical levels is not necessarily caused by insufficient knowledge of the lexico-grammatical particularities of the two languages in contact, but by other factors connected to the specific situation of language use. Starting from this hypothesis, we decided to examine the issue in a systematic manner with a view to identifying, on the one hand, some possible causes for the lexical and grammatical translation errors made by advanced students in English, and, on the other, some didactic strategies that teachers can use in order to minimize the risk of such errors. For the achievement of these objectives, we resort, first of all, to theoretical data regarding the concept of equivalence in translation, and then to research evidence provided by a study focused on the translations produced by our 3rd year students in the Applied Modern Languages section in our university.

2. On Equivalence in Translation

The production of a good translation, be it of literary or specialized nature, depends on the use of those linguistic features that ensure a relation of equivalence with the source text. The problem is that what represents an appropriate relation of equivalence is rather difficult to describe, and this happens for two main reasons: on the one hand, there is the fact that, in the discipline of Translation Studies, the concept in question does have a unitary definition (Halverson 1997), and, on the other, there is the complex nature of equivalence, which involves a variety of sub-types. Each of these reasons is detailed below.

2.1. Conceptual Problems Related to Equivalence

Even if the theory of translation has always been focused on identifying those factors that facilitate the achievement of a good target text, the manner in which the notions of accuracy and correctness have been discussed throughout the years is far from having a unitary and homogeneous character. Thus, ever since the early days of the activity of translating, there have been numerous attempts at theorizing this activity, contributions which, in most of the cases, involved the translators' reflections with regard to their own work, and which referred to the correctness of the translation in terms of the relation of "faithfulness" or "fidelity" between a target text and its source variant. As Dimitriu (2006: 42) points out, this relation represented a matter of dispute between the supporters of a literal type of translation (as it was the case of the Bible's first translators), and those of a free translation (such as Cicero and Quintilian). In the second half of the twentieth century, Translation Studies became established as an academic discipline, being greatly influenced by linguistics. In this context, the standards associated with a correct translation involved a particular type of relationship established between the source text and the target text, relationship which was typically described as "equivalence". In these prescriptive theories of translation, equivalence was regarded as the main criterion that guided both the production and the assessment of a target text.

The concept of equivalence started to lose much of its importance once theorists adhered to the belief that the act of translation always involves dealing with a text in a particular situation and a particular culture. This change of focus from the linguistic structure of the source text towards contextual factors was closely related to the rise of the functionalist approaches, on the one hand, and of the descriptive approaches, on the other. For the functionalists (for instance, Vermeer 1989, Nord 1997), the most influential factor in any process of translation is not necessarily the linguistic makeup of the source text, but the purpose – or, as they call it, the *skopos* – that the translated variant is expected to serve in the target context. This does not mean that the importance of the target text is underestimated, but that the linguistic elements structuring the source text must be adapted to the conventions of the target language in accordance with the target-text *skopos* (Nord 1997: 62).

The descriptive translation studies demoted even more the concept of equivalence with the special emphasis they gave to the socio-cultural aspects of the act of translating, emphasis which led to the establishment of the concept of norms as the new standard of correctness. In the approach proposed by Toury (1995), one of the main representatives of the norm theory, the concept of equivalence is reduced to an outcome determined by the translator's decisions. More specifically, if a certain text has been accepted in a particular culture as a translation, it means that the text in question must be constructed according to the target culture norms, and, additionally, it must have established some kind of relationship with its source. Toury (1995: 86) suggests that, whatever this relationship turns out to be, it should be called "equivalence".

2.2. The Complex Nature of Equivalence

Given the multiplicity of approaches and definitions of the concept, it is not at all surprising that the discussion regarding what exactly defines the nature of equivalence is also rather challenging. This happens because, since the establishment of the discipline of Translation Studies, there have been numerous translation scholars who were interested in the identification of the features that determine the nature of the concept, and who, in correlation with those features, devised different typologies of equivalence. Some influential contributions in this respect are mentioned in what follows.

Attempts at sub-categorizing equivalence have been made ever since the early days of the discipline of Translation Studies, namely from the time when this discipline was influenced by

linguistics. It is worth mentioning that, even if coming from the area of the linguistic and textlinguistic approaches to translation, the first contributions regarding possible sub-divisions of equivalence do not restrict this concept to the achievement of identical meaning at the level of linguistic units. An important such contribution comes from Nida (1964), who is considered to have made the earliest attempt at introducing a recipient-oriented type of equivalence to translation (Rabadán Álvarez 2022). Starting from the comprehension problems caused by cultural barriers in the case of the Bible translation, Nida (1964: 159) distinguishes between two types of equivalence: *dynamic equivalence*, based on the principle of equivalent effect, and *formal equivalence*, focused on the message itself. Another theorist, Koller (1979, 1989) proposes a more detailed categorization, taking into account a number of qualities shared by the source text and the target text elements: *denotative equivalence*, related to the extralinguistic content of a text, *connotative equivalence*, having to do with lexical choices, *text-normative equivalence*, referring to text-types and genres, *pragmatic equivalence*, taking into account the text recipients, and *formal equivalence*, regarding formal and aesthetic aspects of the text. For Neubert (1985), an important representative of the textlinguistic approaches, equivalence is a semiotic category which has three components, each component being related to a specific type of relation: *semantic* (the relation between signs and their objects), *syntactic* (the relation between signs themselves) and *pragmatic* (the relation between signs and their users). In this way, Neubert moves beyond the text, "highlighting the extralinguistic reality and text users" (Rędzioch-Korkuz 2023: 39).

For House (1977, 1997), equivalence is achieved if the function of the source text coincides with the function of the target text. Equivalence represents a fundamental criterion for assessing translation quality; however, this assessment should not be made only from a linguistic perspective, but also from a semantic and a pragmatic one. Therefore, House proposes a distinction between *semantic* and *pragmatic* equivalence, mentioning that it is "both possible and necessary to aim at equivalence of pragmatic meaning at the expense of semantic meaning" (House 1997: 31).

In her approach to the nature of equivalence, Baker (1992) starts from the conviction that modern linguistics, which is no longer restricted to the study of the linguistic systems, can establish a basis for training future translators and can influence the translators' decisions. Thus, she proposes a hierarchical study of equivalence, which starts from the lowest possible level and gradually widens its focus. More exactly, Baker differentiates the following levels of equivalence: word level, above word level, grammatical level, textual level and pragmatic level. At word level, Baker (1992: 10) identifies a series of translation problems that arise "when there is no word in the target language which expresses the same meaning as the source language word" and discusses a number of strategies for dealing with such problems. Going one step higher, above word level, Baker examines what happens when the problems of translation involve combinations of words that form stretches of language. At grammatical level, Baker looks at the manner in which various grammatical categories (e.g. number, gender, person, tense, aspect, voice) affect decisions during the process of translation. In the case of the textual equivalence, Baker suggests that the translator should pay attention to information dynamics (thematic and information structures), on the one hand, and to cohesive devices, on the other. Concerning pragmatic equivalence, Baker focuses on the manner in which utterances are used in real communicative situations, as well as the manner in which they are interpreted in context. Baker admits that the division of language into various areas is artificial, but, at the same time, she considers that "it can help to pinpoint potential areas of difficulty in translation." (Baker 1992: 5).

Finally, we will mention a more recent study on the nature of equivalence, one which can also serve as a conclusion to the discussion in this section. The study is authored by Pym (2007), who claims that the various theories on equivalence have actually involved "two competing conceptualizations: 'natural' as opposed to 'directional' equivalence" (272). Natural equivalence is based on the assumption of pre-existing equivalents, while directional equivalence involves the

idea that equivalents are created by the translator. In Pym's view, it is the fact that these two approaches are often intertwined that is responsible for the confusion and the criticism associated with the concept of equivalence.

The fact that there is such a multitude of contributions focused on the nature of the translation equivalence – some of which have been illustrated in this section – support Baker's (1992: 6) claim that equivalence can generally be achieved only to some extent, as "it is influenced by a variety of linguistic and cultural factors and is therefore always relative". Embracing Baker's view of equivalence, the authors of the present study consider that, for didactic purposes, equivalence can be analyzed at different linguistic levels, and, therefore, propose a discussion of the lexical and grammatical problems encountered by advanced students in English during the process of translation from English into Romanian.

3. Problems of Lexical and Grammatical Equivalence as Revealed by the Students' Translation Assignments

3.1. Research Context

Any problem that occurs in the process of rendering a source text into a target language can be solved if the translator uses appropriate strategies. If such strategies are not used, then the problem is very likely to become a translation error. Therefore, by looking at the errors displayed by a target text, we can get information about the problems that the translator of that text encountered, and that he/she was not able to solve. In order to identify the lexical and the grammatical translation errors occurring in the assignments produced by our advanced students in English, and to understand some of the reasons underlying the occurrence of such errors, we initiated a study focused on a set of translations from English into Romanian produced by 45 students in the 3rd year of the Modern Applied Languages section in the West University of Timișoara, Romania. The translations were submitted in the period between February and May 2022 as part of the portfolio that students had to create for their end-of-semester assessment. Three English texts were proposed for translation, each having around 250-300 words and each of them corresponding to a different type of text, namely impressionistic description (type A), news story (type B) and expository essay (type C). Attention had to be paid to the features specific to each of these types for various reasons that we are going to explain here briefly. Impressionistic descriptions focus on abstract associations, stressing the importance of subjectivity and personal implications or point of view. Diametrically opposite to them, there is the news story, part of the journalistic genre. The role of the news story is to render the information in the most coherent and concise way, in an objective and impartial manner. The expository essay, on the other hand, blends the idea of investigation and clarity of the news report with the attention to details that characterizes the impressionistic genre. Since our intention was not to make statistics, but to reflect a certain reality, our study is qualitative in nature, being meant to point to some of the lexical and grammatical problems encountered by our students when translating the texts mentioned above. The source of the examples selected from the students' translations is indicated by the abbreviations ST (source text) and TT (target text), to which we add the letter corresponding to the text type (A, B or C) and the number of the target text variant (1, 2, 3, etc.).

3.2. Research Findings

3.2.1. The Lexical Level

In lexical terms, most of the errors displayed by the students' translations are related to the inappropriate treatment of two main categories of lexical items, as detailed below.

The first category includes general lexical items whose meanings are wrongly interpreted and, consequently, are paralleled by incorrect target solutions. A first example is the verb *to jam* in the structure "*The party **jammed** the Continental Room*" (TTA), structure which, in Romanian, becomes "*petrecerea **a blocat** camera"* (TT-A-1), "*petrecerea **a ajuns la numărul maxim**"* (TT-A-2), "*petrecerea **a dat pe afară***" (TT-A-3). It is obvious that all these Romanian variants convey a wrong meaning, probably obtained by association with the traffic jams. The idea expressed by the source text is that the room was indeed full, but not necessarily blocked, as suggested by TTA-1; moreover, the lexical choice in TTA-3 (i.e., *a da pe afară*) is not only incorrect in itself, but it also builds a strange collocation. Another example is the verb *to stream* in "*Students **were streaming** from their classes*" (TT-B) which becomes "*Studenții **circulau** de la cursurile lor"* (TT-B-1), "*Studenții **mergeau** de la orele lor*" (TT-B-2). The meaning of the original verb, which is based on the idea of moving in large numbers in a continuous flow, is lost in the Romanian variants which, therefore provide incomplete solutions.

Sometimes the wrong interpretation is related to general words which are, however, used with specific meanings in that particular context. It is the case of nouns like *operations* (cf. ***operations** of search* – TTB) or *slices* (cf. ***slices** of tissue* – TTC) which are sometimes rendered by means of the general equivalents ***operații*** and ***felii/ părți*** instead of the more specialized variants *operațiuni* and *porțiuni*, which represent the right solutions in those contexts.

The second category involves cultural items, which need special attention from the translator. Among these items, a special position is occupied by terms denoting dishes, terms which are considered to be deeply rooted in their culture of origin. An example is *pigs in blankets* (ST-A), for which some students give inappropriate target variants like *cârnăciori în bacon*, *hot-dogi*, *cârnați înveliți în bacon*, ignoring the recognized equivalent *cârnăciori în foietaj*. Another term, *ladyfingers* (ST-A), is generally rendered correctly by the students by means of the equivalent *pișcoturi*. However, there are also some cases when this term is preserved as such in the Romanian variants, or when, on the contrary, it is rendered literally as *degete de doamnă*, Borrowing is not necessary as long as we have an established equivalent, while the literal translation reflects lack of interest for the context in which this term is used. A final example mentioned here is *potted meat balls* (ST-A) which is frequently paralleled by inappropriate solutions like *chiftele în sos*, *chiftele în boluri* and *chifteluțe la ceaun*, and more rarely by the established variant *chiftele marinate*.

3.2.2. The Grammatical Level

From a grammatical point of view, the translation problems are basically determined by the misinterpretation of the grammatical value presented by certain words and structures in the original text, on the one hand, and by the wrong rendering of the syntactic relations existing between various clause or phrase constituents, on the other.

The cases of wrong interpretation of the grammatical value presented by a lexical element in a particular context are not very numerous, but, when they occur, they lead to awkward formulations in the target text. Such a situation is illustrated, for instance, by the rendering of the auxiliary verb *would* as an element building the Conditional Mood, instead of one building Future in the Past: "*(He … was assembling notes for) a book which **would outline** the strategy*" (ST-C)/ "o carte care ***ar schița*** strategia" (TT-C-1); "*o carte care **ar contura** strategia*" (TT-C-2). The incorrect use of a verb in the Conditional mood in these Romanian translations makes the resulting target sentences sound not only awkward, but also incomplete, since a conditional clause being somehow expected to follow. Another case of misinterpretation is associated with this structure: "***One is reminded** of Professor Roche's remark"* (ST-B). Some of our students considered that the indefinite pronoun *one* had to rendered in Romanian, and thus produced inappropriate target variants like "***Cineva** își amintește de...*" (TT-B-1) or "*I-a fost amintită **cuiva**...*" (TT-B-2). Such translations indicate that students ignored the fact that the indefinite pronoun *one* followed by a

verb in the passive voice has an impersonal meaning and must be paralleled by a similar structure in the target text.

The situations in which the syntactic relations existing between the source text grammatical constituents are rendered incorrectly at the level of the translated text are more numerous. For instance, the meaning of the English pattern illustrated by "*Rocky threw open the Americana (for a Sunday reception)*" (ST-A) is distorted in some of the students' variants because words are combined in a different manner and other grammatical relations are established between them: "*Rocky a dat o petrecere de tip american* (TT-A-1), *"Rocky a deschis spontan ușile hotelului Americana pentru o petrecere duminicală* (TT-A-2). In these translations, the problems of grammatical nature are associated with lexical problems, since, for instance, TT-A-1 indicates that the translator did not do any research into the source culture for the identification of the term *the Americana*, while TT-A-2 displays a collocation which conveys a wrong meaning in Romanian (*a deschis spontan ușile*). Similar distortion is sometimes produced in the case of some complex noun phrases which have several modifiers. For instance, "*a vast concrete-and-glass student factory*" (TT-B) was wrongly rendered in Romanian as "*o fabrică de studenți din mult beton și sticlă*" (TT-B-1) or as "*o vastă fabrică stundențească din beton și sticlă*" (TT-B-2), variants which both fail not only to reflect the grammatical relations existing in the original structure, but also to render logical semantic content.

3.3.3. Discussion of Research Findings

Even if the texts to be translated illustrate different types or genres, our study demonstrates that students encounter similar translation problems in all these texts, both at the lexical and at the grammatical levels. The errors of lexical nature demonstrate that some student translators did not go through the stage of research that would have helped them identify the best target variant, but simply resorted to solutions that they quickly identified at that moment. Grammatical problems were not determined by the mismatch between the grammatical categories of the source language and those of the target language, but by the fact that students paid insufficient attention to understanding the grammatical function of a certain source-language element or the syntactic relations that it establishes with other elements.

An important finding is that a particular type of error (lexical or grammatical, in our case) is generally associated with another type, as revealed by the frequent cases when a grammatically incorrect structure also displays a case of awkward collocation or of a meaning which is not functionally or logically appropriate in that context. This supports once more the idea that there is a strong interconnection between all the levels of equivalence, even if, at a particular moment or in a certain situation, one level requires more focus and consideration from the translator in comparison to the others.

4. Some Didactic Implications

It is obvious that, whenever translation is used in a teaching context, the main goal is that of guiding students towards the achievement of lexical and grammatical equivalence between the given source text and its translated variant. However, it must be stressed that the manner in which the text to be translated is to be approached during the classes designed for potential future translators differs from the one used in any common foreign language class, in which, after receiving the source text, the students just start working on it, taking each sentence in its turn and trying to render its direct meaning as accurately as possible. The only resources that students (maybe) consult during the general language classes are represented by dictionaries, glossaries of specialized terms, or grammar inventories that help them check the correctness of certain formulations. In case they are asked to justify the choice of a particular linguistic structure, students generally offer arguments related to what is regarded as correct according to the two linguistic systems in contact, or, in other cases, they are not able to produce any explanation, mentioning

only the fact that the solution in question was what "they considered to be the right choice". This manner of approaching the text to be translated is certainly not suitable during teaching programmes with a translator training dimension, where the original text must be considered from a more complex perspective and the translator's choices have to be guided by a wide range of factors. I what follows, we will discuss a possible methodology for the approach of the text to be translated from the perspective of training future translators. The methodology suggested here involves four main stages, as follows:

4.1. Source-Text General Understanding and Analysis

The first contact with a text to be translated is supposed to fulfil two main functions. On the one hand, it should ensure the translator's understanding of the text message, its main purpose, the situation in which it was meant to be used and the audience to which it was targeted. Additionally, this stage should lead to the identification of the potential problems with which translators may be confronted during the process of transferring the text in question from the source language into the target one. In lexical terms, the analysis of the source text should be oriented, among others, towards the identification of the general words with specific meanings in the text, specialized terms, culture-specific elements, or stylistic features such as metaphors, rhetorical devices, puns, rhyme, etc. In grammatical terms, the source-text analysis should focus on the presence of syntactic structures that might be problematic in the process of transfer into another language. Complex noun phrases, very long sentences, or unusual word order are just some examples of such problematic syntactic structures.

4.2. Research Stage

After getting a thorough understanding of the source text meaning and context, and after identifying the potential translation problems raised by this text, the students should do some research with a view to finding solutions to those problems. At this stage, students most commonly rely on a wide range of electronic or printed sources, such as monolingual or bilingual dictionaries, databases, glossaries, and encyclopaedias, which are useful for providing reliable information with regard to the correct words and word combinations to be used in the target text. For information regarding the manner in which similar communicative functions are expressed in particular genres of the source and the target contexts, students may consult a wide range of parallel texts, which, as Neubert (1985: 75) explains, are "texts of equal informativity which have been produced in more or less identical communicative situations" Various types of texts can serve as parallel texts in the translation process: national press in the source or in the target language, other publications illustrating the same genre, electronic corpora, etc. Finally, the future translators must be made aware that they can resort to any person that might be helpful at this documentation stage, from professionals of the field to which the translation belongs to native speakers of the source or of the target language. It is important to stress that translators should return to the research stage whenever they consider this to be necessary during the translation process.

4.3. Producing the Target Text

Based on the results of the research work carried out at the previous stage, students can start making decisions and choices that lead to the actual linguistic format of the translation. By resorting to appropriate translation strategies or techniques, students are supposed to select those target language structures that build a text which renders the meaning of the original variant, and which, at the same time, is both linguistically accurate and contextually appropriate. More exactly, the lexical items, the collocations and the expressions selected by the translator must preserve the meaning of the original variant, but, additionally, they must ensure the functionality of the target

text in the new cultural context. Similarly, the relations existing at grammatical level in the original text (e.g. between head noun and modifiers, between tenses) must be appropriately rendered in the target text, because any translation error or omission in the target text presents the risk of giving false information to the reader.

4.4. Assessing the Translated Variant

This stage is often overlooked, and, most probably, this is the explanation for most of the errors discussed in section 3.2. Translation revision is extremely important, as its role is to check whether the newly created text conveys the information inherent in each unit of translation in a correct manner, whether it is linguistically accurate, and whether it sounds "as though it had originally been written in the target language" (Adab 1996: 34). The students' task at this point is to go systematically through the source text in comparison to the target text with a view to assessing the correctness, readability and naturalness of the translations they produced. It is obvious that each student should do that in the case of the translation that he/ she produced, but, on the other hand, teachers can ask students to read each other's work, as they are likely to bring a greater degree of objectivity in the evaluation of the target texts.

5. Conclusions

Both the theoretical and the practical evidence presented in this paper suggest that producing a correct translation involves a good knowledge of the lexical and grammatical structures of the two languages in contact, but these structures must be selected in relation to various extra-linguistic factors. The important role played by the extra-linguistic variables in the achievement of an appropriate relation of equivalence between an original text and its translation must be highlighted during the translation classes. This means that the translation tasks proposed by teachers should guide students towards the creation of meaning at the level of discourse and not just towards the correct use of particular linguistic forms.

Additionally, when using translation activities with students who are at an advanced level of English and who, moreover, are likely to become professional translators, the teacher should organize the didactic process in a manner in which students are not only helped to find appropriate lexico-grammatical equivalents in particular situations of translation, but they are also made aware of the procedure which is likely to facilitate the creation of an appropriate relation of equivalence in general. This means that teachers should insist that, in order to achieve a correct translation, students should focus only on the stage of target text production, but they should also pay great attention to the preparatory stages of source text understanding and of research, and should not neglect the stage of target text revision. More exactly, the organization of any translation class should be oriented towards producing a real understanding of the translator's task, with everything that it involves in today's world.

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