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What Does Philosophical Translation Need? Mapping the Translational Trajectory of Equivalence in Terminology

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Abstract

The paper zooms in on the problem of equivalence with regard to translating philosophical texts which have so far been marginalized in translation theory. Drawing on Nida's equivalence theory, the author of this paper prioritizes formal equivalence over dynamic one, basing this approach on the specific nature of philosophical discourse. To this end, pertinent extracts from David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* with a special focus on philosophical terminology have been compared with their published Slovak, Czech and German translations. The paper provides an account of how and why the form is bound up with the meaning in the ambit of philosophy. The comparative analysis suggests that the form and function of philosophical discourse is connected to such a degree that the form even constitutes a part of the text's function.

Key words: *philosophy, terminology, philosophical translation, equivalence theory, formal equivalence*

Abstrakt

Artykuł skupia się na problemie ekwiwalencji w odniesieniu do tłumaczenia tekstów filozoficznych, co, jak do tej pory, było marginalizowane przez teorię translacji. W zgodzie z teorią ekwiwalencji Nidy, autorka niniejszego artykułu wskazuje na pierwszeństwo formalnej ekwiwalencji w porównaniu z dynamiczną, opierając to podejście na specyficznej istocie dyskursu filozoficznego. W tym względzie, stosowne urywki tekstu dzieła Davida Hume'a *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem terminologii filozoficznej, zostały porównane z ich tłumaczeniami w języku słowackim, czeskim i niemieckim. Artykuł dostarcza dowodu na to jak

i dlaczego forma jest powiązana z treścią w sferze filozofii. Przeprowadzona analiza porównawcza sugeruje, że w zakresie dyskursu filozoficznego forma i funkcja są powiązane w takim stopniu, że forma komponuje część funkcji tekstu.

Słowa kluczowe: *filozofia, terminologia, tłumaczenie filozoficzne, teoria ekwiwalencji, ekwiwalencja formalna*

Introduction

Much has been written about both literary and non-literary translation. There is, however, one type of discourse which has been given scant attention by translation studies scholars and acquiring any information about philosophical translation is rather troublesome, as some admit (see e.g. Parks, 2004; Knuuttila, 2012). It is the discourse of philosophy.

The present paper, of course, does not purport to address the entire variety of problems one can encounter when translating philosophical discourse[1]. Quite selectively, the paper homes in on the most vital problem in philosophical translation, *i.e.* the problem of equivalence and the issue of how it relates to the fidelity of the target text (hereafter abbreviated as TT) to the source text (hereafter referred to as ST). Firstly, the paper aims to elucidate the choices translators make when translating philosophical texts and secondly, it shows why philosophy is being translated in the specific manner it is. The motivation for writing this paper comes from the author's personal experience with scholars and even students of philosophy who tend to criticize translators for either misinterpreting the originals or for making translations almost unintelligible. Whereas the former problem may often be the outcome of a too free translation, dynamically or functionally equivalent, the latter results from adhering to the ST too much.

One way or another, philosophy represents a field where translations are accompanied by a mixed critical reception. As it is known, philosophical texts are seldom easy to understand. The complexity of the philosophical argument's construction is the chief reason why the translator has to be careful when opting for crafting a translation that is rather dynamically equivalent with the ST (*i.e.* communicates the text's message emphasizing the function

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[1]Although on a stylistic level there is a fine distinction between text and discourse as "a decontextualized vs. contextualized speech event" (cf. Ferenčík, 2016, p. 15), in this paper the two terms are used interchangeably for the sake of simplicity.

of the text over its form) or the one that is more formally equivalent (*i.e.* tries to keep the form of the ST, stressing its interconnectedness with the text's function). Another thing is that philosophical discourse requires a thorough knowledge of the concepts, ideas and purposes of the ST, which determines linguistic choices when translating subtle nuances of meaning which are of high importance to the whole when 'energizing' a text in translation.[2]

Pre-translational 'diagnosis' of philosophical texts

In compliance with functional theories of translation, the ST should be subjected to a thorough translation-oriented analysis prior to the actual process of translation. The analysis of extra-textual factors (as worked out by Nord, 2005) involving in our case the author, audience and translator constitutes an important part of the so-called pre-translational 'diagnosis' of philosophical texts.

The aspects of the ST connected with its author are among the first factors the translator has to take into account. Although philosophers aim for a universal truth of their writings with minimum personal involvement (Munday, 2016, p. 250), it seems crucial to identify the historical and cultural context of the period in which a certain text originated. This is also relevant for the identification of concepts because a new philosophical concept is rarely created without being grounded on some preceding concept. Besides, the author may have a specific problem-orientation which influences their work. For instance, empirical philosophers (where Hume belongs) believing that all human knowledge comes from sensuous experience, present their concepts in a fashion that is a tad easier to understand than that of rationalist philosophers (*e.g.* Descartes), for whom reason was the source of knowledge. Therefore, the more is known to the translator about the particular author and their intention(s), the closer they get to interpreting the ST.

The second prerequisite for a successful philosophical translation is the awareness of the text's audience. Philosophy is written to be read and is thus written with a receiver in mind. There is, however, no agreement as to whether philosophy is aimed at a specific audience or whether it comes with no strings attached. It is true that nowadays, philosophy remains almost exclusively in the domain of universities, being only limitedly absorbed by the general public as it is by nature not suitable for what could be labelled as 'popular consumption'. The pre-translational question, which is

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[2]On the concept of the energy of language in philosophical translation see Pound in Munday 2016: 258 ff.

relevant to the translator to ask, is who (*i.e.* what audience) the author had in mind when composing a particular text? Here, the translator needs to decide if they are translating a text for the addressee, for someone the author conceived the text for, or if they are translating for a 'chance receiver' (see Nord, 2005), *i.e.* the general public. In most cases, philosophical texts are not aimed at chance receivers; they focus on the addressees. Moreover, the chance receiver and the addressee also differ in their approach to text and textuality. While the chance receiver is usually a 'semantic reader', the addressee is expected to be a 'semiotic reader' (see Eco, 1994). The semantic reader concentrates on the information within the text; the meaning. On the other hand, the semiotic reader sets out to understand not only what is said but also how it is said, distinguishing between a semantic and pragmatic meaning. Considering the audience of philosophical discourse, the translator also has to count with the fact that the ST and TT audiences may be several centuries apart. This is why they must be able to predict how much of the information connected to the time of the text's origin is still likely to be understood by the TT audience and how much information needs up-dating.

The third extra-textual factor relates to the personality of the translator of philosophical texts. A very good knowledge of the history of philosophy is necessary for every scholar who conducts any philosophy-oriented research. The same rationale may be applied to the translator because only a thorough knowledge of a philosophical problem makes it possible arrive at a correct translation. This accounts for why it is usually philosophers who translate philosophical texts because studying the ST(s) extensively should precede the actual act of translation. This is because the authors sometimes draw on their forerunners using intertextuality, take issues with their concepts or re-evaluate their theories. In these situations, the knowledge of the history of philosophy is indispensable. What is also interesting to note when analysing the philosophical translator's profile is the fact that many of them have never had any form of training how to translate and are not professional translators.

Translational considerations for philosophical texts

As has been implied, before translating philosophical texts, their firm understanding comes first. What seems to make the situation for the translator complicated is primarily the style of the philosophical argument, marked by the overall complexity, which is many a time not easy to follow. The stylistic complexity is, quite paradoxically, the effect of the opposite author's endeavour to explain things as general as possible. The corollary of such an approach is

that by the overgeneralization the philosophical argument becomes very complex. For illustration, Kant may say that "one' mortal existence achieved its termination [while] Hegel would say that a finite determination of infinity had been further determined by its own negation" (Blanshard, 1953, p. 35). Both statements capture the idea of the event of death, but whereas Kant's statement makes the implicit explicit, Hegel attempts to not only state a fact but also defines it in the process, which may cause that the semantic reader (not to speak of the translator) ends up being entangled in the argument.

In connection to the tendency of philosophy to overgeneralize, the syntactic aspect of translation needs to be addressed. The consequence of the increasing level of generality is that the sentence structure becomes more elaborate. In this respect, the analysed German translation versions of Hume's philosophical writing are the most problematic because the German syntax usually places the finite verb at the end of the clause. In this way, an ultra-long sentence structure may become confusing and consequently requires several re-readings. For this reason, even German university students tend to read *e.g.* Kant's writings in their English translations, which speaks volume about the nature of German philosophical discourse. This poses a question if it were possible to lower the threatening unclarity in philosophical translation. Doing so, however, would mean reversing the author's line of thought, which is to be avoided in philosophy.

From a stylistic point of view, philosophical texts have both a scientific and a moral dimension (see Parks, 2004). The moral dimension is connected to the literary aspect of the philosophical writing, suggesting an author's personal engagement. The scientific and moral levels, however, are never clearly marked off and so it is the translator's task to strike a balance in literary and scientific means of expression. Nonetheless, in philosophical texts, it is not the moral dimension that the author primarily strives for because their aim is, first and foremost, to inform and to communicate ideas. Hence, the translation of philosophical texts exhibits a whole lot of traits of specialized translation. In the scientific ambit of translation, the translator does not have to be so creative and does not need to follow the original means of expressions as closely as possible.

Another problem related to style is philosophical terminology. Philosophers use words in a way that may not be natural for the reader. For illustration, when Hegel says that reason is substance, how is one to imagine the reason? Substance is material, reason is not (see Kiczko et al., 1997, p. 92-94). Such paradoxes may confuse the (semantic) reader and translator. Moreover, philosophers often invent their own terms or assign new

meanings to previously coined terms. All this means that the translator has to pay close attention to the author's words, to the rich, suggestive texture of writing, comparing and contrasting the different uses of one and the same word in different contexts (Parks, 2004, p. 1). Arising from this, it is to be expected that reading and research may take up as much time as the actual translation, without being fully remunerated.

Another thorny issue in philosophical terminology is the uncertainty of terms, *e.g.* the Greek word *logos* may have the following meanings: word, speech, principle, reason, standard or even meaning. For this reason, authors try to use such ambiguous terms in their original form, especially when they become the object of explicit discussions (Rée, 1999, 22). Subsequently, the task of the philosophical translator is to re-create the same ambiguous atmosphere of the discourse; they have to put the TT reader before the same problem. If the translator decided to lessen the obscurity of a certain text passage believing they know what is meant and trying to word it in a more straightforward manner, they could risk missing the author's point entirely.

Equivalence in philosophical translation: theories & interpretations

By and large, equivalence refers to the relationship between the ST and TT which makes it possible to call the final product translation. Terminologically-speaking, equivalence may be understood as "a relation of 'equal value' between a source language term and a target language term which can be established on any linguistic level from form to function" (Pym, 2010, 7). This means that equivalence indicates that a source language term and target language term share some kind of 'sameness', implying an 'illusion of symmetry between languages'[3].

Although approaches to equivalence in translation studies have been put forward by many (among them to mention are *e.g.* Kade, Catford, Jakobson, Koller, Baker or Pym, to name just a few), this paper draws on the concept of equivalence worked out by Nida (1964) who differentiates between formal and dynamic equivalence. In formal equivalence "one is concerned that the message in the receptor language should match as closely as possible the different elements in the source language" (Nida, 1964, p. 159). Later called 'formal correspondence', it is keenly oriented towards the ST structure; the features of the form of the ST are mechanically reproduced in the target language (see Nida and Taber 2003/1969, p. 22-28). Dynamic

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[3]Snell-Hornby qtd. (House, 2015, p. 6).

equivalence, later known as 'functional' equivalence, is based on what Nida dubs as 'the principle of the equivalent effect', where "the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message" (Nida, 1964, p. 159). In other words, the message has to be tailored to the receptor's linguistic needs and their horizon of (cultural) expectations, "aiming at complete naturalness of expression" (Nida, 1964, p. 159).

In contemporary translation studies, striving for formal as well as dynamic equivalence too much is not recommended. As much as the translator aims to achieve a high level of fidelity with the ST, they ought not to be too faithful and attempt to reproduce all features of the ST. Similarly, a too free communicative translation is equally being frowned upon for its takes too many liberties with the TT. Based on this it may be claimed that there is no agreement as to what sort of equivalence is to be aimed at in translation. All the same, a plausible translation is the one which preserves the author's intention, keeps the text's purpose, allows the recipient to access the same information and provides them with the same experience at the same time.

Terminological equivalence in close-up

Methodologically, the randomly selected philosophical terms from Hume's writing are compared across their Slovak, Czech and German translations, using the methods of comparative textual analysis. Although the performed probe into philosophical translation is rather limited by the choice of the author, it does have the potential of signposting vital strands of problems in philosophical translation. Nonetheless, the paper abstains from reviewing the translations under investigation at a more complex level (assessing style, adequacy, translations shifts, changes of expression at the macro- and micro-stylistic level etc.) which would fall outside this paper's remit. In this paper, I understand terms as units of specialized philosophical knowledge whose correct translation requires an expert degree of conceptual fluency that is present only in semiotic readers.

Perhaps the most central philosophical terms in Hume's treatise are those of *justice* and *injustice*. What needs to be mentioned is that Hume's ethics is a product of society and its conventions, which leads him to argue that *justice* is an artificial value. The problem with translating justice in a straightforward denotative way as *spravodlivosť* could cause that the term would acquire a broader meaning than it has in the English ST. Namely, in Slovak *spravodlivosť* is used to refer to a larger scale of concepts than its

English equivalent, *e.g.* in a sentence such as "Život nie je spravodlivý", the term *spravodlivý* does not refer to the fact that life does not follow the rules of justice, but that it is not fair. Hence, "Life is not fair" would make the sentence above correct in translation, where fairness has nothing to do with justice. In its legal meaning, *justice* means "a moral ideal that the law seeks to uphold in the protection of rights and punishment of wrongs" (Law and Martin, 2014). Although it may be true that *spravodlivosť* also fits the given definition, it is also used to refer to objective universal fairness, which Hume is arguing against, by claiming justice to be "artificial".

Upon interlingual comparison of the philosophical terms at hand, one finds out that the same problem crops up in the 1973 German translation. Similarly to the Slovak translation, the German translator did not use *Gerechtigkeit* and *Ungerechtigkeit*, respectively, but went on to use *Rechtsinn* or *Rechtsordnung* for *justice*[4] and *Rechtswidrigkeit* for *injustice*.[5] Such terminological choices approximate the translation to the authorial intention and help the reader understand his philosophical message.

Similarly, the attendant 2007 Slovak translation shares similarities with the published German translation as *justice* is translated as *zmysel pre právo* or *právny poriadok* and *injustice* appears as *protiprávnosť*. Moreover, the German and Slovak translation both contain the problem that sometimes the reader may lose track of the philosophical argument because they are presented with a double variation of terms for the same concept, which might be confusing.

Another term that is worthy of scholarly attention is that of artifice. Not only does it imply *artificiality*, as opposed to naturalness, but it may also be used to refer to "a clever trick or something intended to deceive" (Cambridge Dictionary online). Consider the following translations under examination:

English original: We now proceed to examine two questions concerning the manner in which the rules of justice are established by the **artifice** of men [...]

German 1973 translation: Wir kommen jetzt zu der Untersuchung von zwei Fragen; die erste betrifft die Art wie die Normen der Rechtsordnung durch *Menschenkunst* festgellegt worden sind [...]

Czech 1994 translation: Přicházíme niní ke zkoumaní dvou otázek, z nichž prvá se týka způsobů, jak byly **uměním člověka** zjišteny normy právního pořádku [...]

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[4]The German terms *Rechtssinn* and *Rechtsordnung* best correspond to 'sense of law' and 'rule of law', respectively.

[5]*Rechtswidrigkeit* best corresponds to 'unlawfulness' in English.

Slovak 2007 translation: Teraz prichádzame k preskúmaniu dvoch otázok, a to ohľadom spôsobu, ktorým sa **zručnosťou človeka** stanovujú pravidlá právneho poriadku [...]

As can be seen, the German translation employs the term *Menschenkunst*, with *Mensch* meaning *man* and *Kunst* having the semantics of *art* and *artificiality*, however, missing the semantic component of trickery. Besides, art implies a certain veneer of nobility, while Hume's intention in the treatise is to emphasize an egoistic nature of the *artifice* by means of which the rules of justice are established. In a similar vein, the Czech equivalent *umění* does not capture this semantic component of meaning, either although it approximates to the English original a tad more faithfully because the Czech word *umět* means to "have a skill". The Slovak translation seems slightly more appropriate by being semantically closer the other original, but it is not an ideal translation solution, either because it lacks the semantic component of deceit, too.

Another problem when the translator cannot apply the denotative meaning in their translation concerns the terms *public benevolence* and *private benevolence*. The closest Slovak equivalents *verejná benevolencia* and *osobná benevolencia* would create a calqued impression, in the same way as with translating *justice* and *injustice*, where the philosophical interpretation by the semiotic reader is necessary. Hence, the philosophically correct translation equivalents are those of *usílie o verejné blaho* and *úsilie o osobné blaho*. In these exceptional cases, a too high degree of formal equivalence is not desirable.

Furthermore, there is one important term in the treatise for which there is no satisfactory Slovak equivalent. The term *affection* signifies an emotion, a fondness or liking (in a positive sense) and an inclination towards something (in a neutral sense)[6]. In Slovak, the former meaning corresponds to *náklonnosť* whereas the latter to *sklon*. In German, there are two terms, *Zuneigung* and *Neigung*, differing only in the presence of a prefix. Therefore, in the German translation it is obvious that the two TL terms refer to the same SL concept. In Slovak, this is not evident because *affection* may be rendered as *náklonnosť* or *city*, with a semantic difference. Here, it is also important to rule out faux amis, because one could also easily suggest that another possible Slovak equivalent could be that of *afekt*. The formal similarity to the English term would, however, lead to an unfitting target language term and linguistically erroneous translation solution, because *afekt* in Slovak refers to a state of mind when one is under the control of strong passions and loses his mental balance,[7] which is not implied in the philosophical discourse

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[6]See www.oed.com

[7]See www.slovniky.juls.savba.sk for the exact definition.

at all. What is noteworthy though, is that the Czech translation even uses four different terms for *affection*: *náklonnost, afekt, hnutí, zájem*. Although this may help the translator to achieve a smooth and naturally flowing translation, a dynamic approach to equivalence obscures the text's message and makes it even more demanding for the reader to follow the terminology.[8]

Based on the performed selective probe into philosophical terminology, it can be seen that a dynamic approach to equivalence may be not welcome as the translator may move away from the implied meaning in such a way that it is almost contrary to the original author's intention, as in the case of *justice* and *artifice*. Apart from this, dynamic equivalence can trigger off terminological inconsistencies, which make it strenuous for the reader to keep track of the terminology and philosophical argument, as in the case of *affection* in the Czech translation. One also needs to be heedful of potential faux amis, which may lead to erroneous translations, *e.g. affection* does not correspond to *afekt* in Slovak. Last but far from least, it is vital to reiterate that many philosophical terms are contextualized in their meaning only in a particular place of the discourse.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the performed probe, I propose the preference of formal equivalence over dynamic one in respect to the translation of philosophical terminology. This is because the form and function of philosophical texts are so intertwined that the form even forms a part of the text's function. Another argument not in favour of dynamic equivalence is that philosophy nullifies concepts that lay people usually assign to certain terms and fills them with new, philosophically-rooted semantics. This causes that certain terms are only intelligible to philosophy connoisseurs, who are semiotic readers, in sharp contrast to semantic chance receivers. If philosophical discourse were to be rendered in a more straightforward manner, it would pave the way for more room for dynamic equivalence. This would, however, run against the nature of philosophy.

Based on the comparative analysis of the philosophical terms, the following recommendations can be given: the translator has to contextualize the precise meaning of the term depending on its philosophical interpretation (which is often not identical to the denotative term meaning); it is

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[8]Intriguingly enough, a similar problem appears in the translation of Kant when e.g. his central term 'nature' (*Natur* in the German original) may be translated into Slovak, depending on the context, as either 'príroda' or 'povaha'.

essential for the same philosophical term to be used consistently so as not to confuse the reader and distort the message; the philosophical argument's logical structure has to be kept and the translator should not interfere with philosophy as a science, *i.e.* they should not add or remove any elements so as to approximate to the (ideal) reader. In sum, the paper has provided an account on how and why the form is bound up with the meaning in the specialized field of philosophy. Although the treatment of equivalence in the translation of philosophical terminology is by no means exhaustive, it has signposted some vital problems whose verification is in need of further, quantitatively-oriented research.

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