

Preface

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**Structural Propensities: Translating nominal word groups
from English into German**

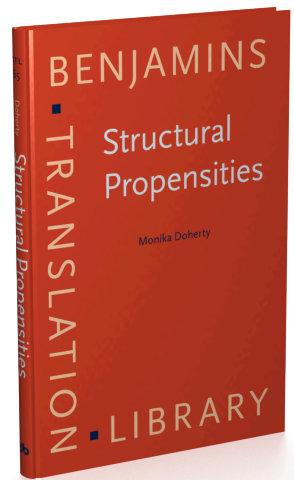
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Preface

When George Steiner (1975:497) says in his famous book *After Babel*: “To a greater or lesser degree, every language offers its own reading of life”, he does not think of the structural properties languages have – certainly not of the most general ones, which he excludes from his considerations explicitly. Quoting Hymes (1973:63), he states: “Most of language begins where abstract universals leave off.” Surely, this is the case when we translate Schiller or Shakespeare, Arno Schmidt or James Joyce. But although the challenges of translation are most fascinating in the realms of poetic language, the ‘common’ translator has to come to terms with the everyday use of language, which leaves traditional grounds less often. And the everyday use of language, which may also include literary ingredients, like metaphors, puns and the whole array of intertextual features, is controlled by special conventions determining selection and interpretation of linguistic means appropriate to the communicative situation, the discourse. Such conventions may not only differ from language to language, they may also lead to different results when aiming at similar targets. If, for example, there were a common convention aiming at an economical use of linguistic means, the difference between the language systems would promote different solutions more often than not.

Differences between two language systems do not only reside in their words, they are also involved in the way in which words assemble into word groups and sentences, that is in the rules and regularities constituting the grammar of a language. But even words and grammar together are not yet sufficient to explain the differences we can observe in the use of similar linguistic forms. If we restrict attention to the linguistic forms of sentences, there are many paraphrases of an original sentence available and the question for the translator is: Why did the author choose this version and which version would really recreate the author’s choice in another language?

The answer to this question has many different aspects, but one that could be considered most basic. Whether the author’s choice is felt to be neutral or marked, either impact will be measured against a set of specific conditions characterizing the discourse appropriate use of language. The set of these

conditions is specific in two ways: (1) it relates to the global and local properties of the particular discourse in which the linguistic choice is made and (2) it relates to the grammatical and stylistic properties of the language from which the linguistic means are chosen. The global properties would leave a wide variety of choices open were it not for the local properties of the discourse, that is, the form and meaning of the preceding and subsequent sentences. But even so, there is still a great variety of paraphrases available and the major question remains: Why did the author choose certain linguistic forms, as for example a particular word order, and which order recreates the author's choice in a target language?

Any answer to such questions presupposes a number of linguistic and psycholinguistic hypotheses about the theoretical framework we can use to systematically analyze the special structural conditions which control the discourse appropriate use of linguistic means in an original and its translation. The different conditions will concern clausal and phrasal structures and relate to questions of word order, case frame, word class, syntactic dependencies, explicitness and the like.

Restricting attention to such structural properties will be felt to impoverish translation studies but – if we proceed slowly and patiently – it will allow us to gain some insight into the most general conditions of language use. The approach is rather modest as we will restrict attention to one pair of languages: English and German, and to unmarked, written texts of academic prose. But as the discussion of the more than hundred examples in the following will show, the complexity of the structural and functional properties determining the appropriateness of syntactic and lexical choices in original and in translation is still extremely high.

The book is the result of a series of research projects on the appropriate use of word order, perspective and structural explicitness in German translations from English texts, sponsored by the German research foundation, DFG, from the year 1991 on. Its basic methodological and theoretical claims were presented at the very beginning of this period (in LiLi, among others, 1991, under the title of 'Informationelle Holzwege/Informational garden paths'). Each of the research projects aimed at filling in one more part of the overall picture, looking into the conditions of English and German word order, case frame, clausal or phrasal structures and their different combinatorial options.

The last project focused on the details of the appropriate use of nominal word groups in English and German, the result of which is presented in Chapters 3, 4 and 5: differences between English original sentences and their German translations concerning noun phrase internal restructuring; noun phrase exter-

nal restructuring – including cleft- and cleft-like sentences; cross-sentential restructuring involving sequences of sentences; as well as restructuring involving semantically equivalent appositions.

The first and second chapter will introduce the basic methodological and theoretical concepts used for the structural and functional descriptions of nominal word groups within their sentences and the wider linguistic and situational context. Each chapter is summarized in the end by a set of basic hypotheses.

The last, sixth chapter will suggest an extension of the basic findings onto other topics, taking a look at cultural and literal aspects, also in relation to other languages, and hold the prosaic approach of discourse appropriate translation against the opposite goal of ‘literal’ translation.

The empirical basis for the research projects has been accumulated over more than twenty years; we have termed it the ‘Berlin corpus of translation’. Its main core consists of twelve texts from *New Scientist* which were originally translated by students of our Institute at the Humboldt-University, Berlin, in the 1980ies. The translations have been reworked again and again, applying the method of control paraphrases (which is illustrated in the following introduction) while concentrating on certain research topics, including the topics chosen by the students for their final papers. The procedure is still being pursued today – at present we are studying apparently redundant, ‘dummy’ structures in nominal word groups occurring in the original or in the translation.

The empirical work involves up to thirty students, who assess the discourse appropriateness of systematically varied translational versions after they have gone through a close analysis of what it is that a sentence contributes to its discursive context. The translational version which is in the end preferred by a clear majority of the participants (usually between seventy to ninety percent) will then be added to our corpus, replacing an older, less appropriate version. The structural and functional properties of such ‘target versions’ are the testing ground for particular claims about the different conditions of discourse appropriate language use in English and German.

The procedure is open-ended because of the enormous combinatorial potential of all the factors involved in the variations (and – as the majority of our work relies on native speakers of German – more speculative in English). But even if not all details of a target version can be dealt with this way (the following discussion of individual examples will concentrate on the major research topics), we are convinced that the method of control paraphrases is an efficient tool to study some of the intricacies of translation in a systematic and, to a certain extent, verifiable way.