Abstract

This paper attempts to relate translation studies and the theory of language acquisition, two research areas that have traditionally developed separately, by looking at recent findings on some grammatical properties of translated texts on the one hand, and the results of acquisitional studies dealing with those same properties on the other. In addition to reviewing research on the long known phenomenon of pronoun overuse, it focuses on a less explored problem, namely the overuse of possessive adjectives, reporting preliminary data from English to Serbian translations. Based on a comparison with the results obtained in acquisitional studies of possessives, it is argued that the different cases of patterning between translation and language acquisition, in particular second language acquisition and first language attrition, point to a similarity in the linguistic systems of translators and language acquirers, or attriters, and speak in favour of closer collaboration between the fields. In particular, we suggest that such collaboration could be of benefit to future translators, whom the knowledge of language acquisition theory could help become more aware of the domains of grammar that are particularly problematic.

1. Introduction

A substantial amount of recent research within translation studies has targeted the linguistic properties of translated texts as compared to non-translated texts,
with the goal of identifying the distinctive features of translations and the exact ways in which they diverge from texts spontaneously produced in the same language. This research has had a dual focus on source language interference with the target language and on possible universal properties of translation, combining an approach that is contrastive in nature with one that is concerned with patterns typical of translated texts as such, regardless of the language combination. At the same time, a major strand of research in the area of language acquisition has been devoted to problems that appear to come up in different types of bilingual contexts, ranging from simultaneous bilingualism and heritage language acquisition to child and adult second language acquisition and first language attrition. Here too a lot of attention has been paid to separating interference effects from what can be attributed to the general effects of possessing two languages; in addition, the phenomena looked at in acquisitional research are in many cases similar to the ones explored within translation studies. But despite the considerable overlap in research interest, with the notable exception of several isolated studies, the two disciplines continue to develop apart.

In this paper, we wish to suggest that bringing these two disciplines closer together is highly desirable, for both theoretical and practical reasons. Specifically, we maintain that translation studies and acquisitional research could greatly benefit from each other’s insights when formulating pedagogical implications, as they both have a strong focus on identifying problems and trying to prevent them through targeted education. We concentrate on illustrating how the findings of acquisitional research can inform the field of translation studies and translator education. Building on previous work, the starting point for our argument is a case study of the overuse of possessive adjectives in translation from English into Serbian. The study is based on the analysis of two books, J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* and *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. The findings are compared to the results of previous acquisitional studies, i.e. the patterns noted in bilingual speakers whose one language uses possessives more parsimoniously than the other. Given that comparable trends are found in translation and language acquisition, we argue that the similarity between the two contexts can be exploited in translation teaching, and that the rate of overuse errors in translated texts could be at least partly reduced by giving more prominence to the linguistic aspects of the relevant degree courses. In particular, we suggest that the linguistic training of future translators should include elements of the theory of bilingual language acquisition; we believe that by identifying the areas that are crosslinguistically found to be problematic in bilingual situations, future translators could increase their awareness of otherwise disregarded linguistic issues, consequently reducing the amount of subtle grammatical problems which contribute to differentiating translated from non-translated texts.

1 We will henceforth be using the term ‘bilingual’ in its widest sense, as referring to any situation characterised by some level of knowledge of two languages.
2. Previous research

2.1 Translation as a special language code

The interest in the distinctive features of translated texts arose out of the long-standing general impression that, despite clearly belonging to the target language system, translations represent a special subset of that system, a code or register on its own. The impression is also expressed in labels such as Gellerstam’s (1986) translationese, to date quite widely used in translation studies. The ‘specialness’ of translation was initially attributed to contact and interference between the particular source and target languages, but numerous subsequent studies have argued that some properties of translated texts are independent of the source language, being product exclusively of the fact that they belong to a translation. Both perspectives continue to be at the centre of attention of translation studies scholars.

In line with the general tendency in the field, early studies of translationese mainly focused on the lexical and discursive properties of translated texts, suggesting that, compared to non-translated texts, translations are characterised by a higher degree of explicitness (Blum-Kulka 1986, Baker 1993) and a lower level of lexical density (Baker 1995). Later work has also discovered a range of syntactic features specific to translations; notably, Borin & Prütz (2001) reported evidence of the overuse of pronouns, in particular pronominal subjects, as well as overuse of adverbs, infinitives and preposition-initial sentences.

However, for the topic of the present paper it is particularly important to single out studies that relate translation to second language acquisition, i.e. that make an explicit connection between the properties of translational language and the interlanguage of language learners. Among the previously mentioned studies, Blum-Kulka (1986) notices that similar explicitation strategies appear in translations and the written work of second language learners; similarly, Borin & Prütz (2001) indicate that the overuse of certain syntactic elements is characteristic of both learner language and translations. In addition, in a more recent study, Gaspari and Bernardini (2008) present a research program that aims at comparing larger corpora of translated Italian and English both with similar collections of non-native written production in the same languages, and with native monolingual corpora as a baseline, suggesting that the purported translation universals might in fact be better conceived of as mediation universals, as they seem to extend beyond the domain of translated texts and into the wider area of mediated communication. This view is one of the clearest links between translation studies and language acquisition research, which also indicates that similarities exist across the board and that some grammatical properties are shared by all contexts in which there is an involvement of two languages.

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2 On a methodological note, it should be recalled that following the seminal paper by Baker (1993) many studies of translational language have become oriented towards the methods of corpus linguistics, which gives them the advantage of being based on substantial quantities of data.
2.2 Vulnerable domains in bilingualism

Some of the syntactic phenomena mentioned in translation studies have also been extensively explored in language acquisition research. This is particularly true of the overuse of overt pronominal subjects in null-subject languages; a number of studies have looked at this issue in different bilingual contexts and in a variety of language combinations. Specifically, problems with the overuse of overt subjects have been attested in near-native speakers of Italian with English as the native language (Sorace & Filiaci 2006), and in persons affected by attrition of their first language (Greek or Italian) under the influence of English as a second language (Tsimpli et al. 2004). Crucially for our topic, the development of this strongly comparative approach between multiple bilingual contexts has led to the inclusion of translation in the same research paradigm, and Cardinaletti (2004, 2005) established that in translations from English and German into Italian overt subjects are occasionally used in contexts in which they would normally be omitted in Italian spontaneous production. She provides several examples of this pattern, two of which are reported below (from Cardinaletti 2004: 137-138). As can be seen from the examples, the problematic sentences are not straightforwardly ungrammatical; rather, they can be described as inappropriate for the given discourse context.

(1) a. [...] he knew that if he screwed up his face and wailed, his mother would give him anything he wanted (HP, 22).
   b. [...] sapeva che se contorceva la faccia e si lagnava la madre gli avrebbe dato qualsiasi cosa lui avesse chiesto (HP, 26).

(2) a. He’d never been more nervous, never, not even when he’d had to take a school report home to the Dursleys saying that he’d somehow turned his teacher’s wig blue (HP, 86).
   b. Non era mai stato nervoso in vita sua, mai, neanche quando era tornato a casa con una nota della scuola in cui si diceva che, non si sa come, lui aveva fatto diventare blu la parrucca dell’insegnante (HP, 111).

An important feature of all of the above studies is that they are couched in a well-defined theoretical framework, constituted most directly by the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace & Filiaci 2006), and related to different versions of generative grammar. According to the Interface Hypothesis, the phenomena that are most vulnerable in bilingual contexts are those pertaining to an interface between syntax and another language domain, especially pragmatics or discourse. In other words, as stated by Cardinaletti (2005: 68, 81), problems are likely to occur with those grammatical phenomena that offer several options (e.g. realisation vs. non-realisation of an overt subject), choosing among which is subject to multiple constraints. Regardless of whether this view will ultimately be proved to be correct in its every aspect, it is a useful tool for the systematic manner in which it predicts the vulnerable phenomena.

Relating her findings on translation to the results of acquisitional studies, Cardinaletti concludes that translators undergo a form of language attrition, in which the knowledge of their mother tongue (the target language of translation) becomes partly modified due to the prolonged influence of a second lan-
language (the source language of translation). That is to say, she sees the special properties of translated texts, i.e. what in translation studies is identified as translationese, as a sign of a change in the translators’ internal linguistic system, in their ‘mental grammar’.

Clearly, an important caveat is needed here, as the conclusions about the translators’ linguistic system are based on textual data alone. The author herself admits (see in particular Cardinaletti 2005: 75) that a stronger claim about translators being affected by language attrition could only be made based on more direct data obtained in more psycholinguistically oriented tasks, i.e. the same type of tasks used in acquisitional studies such as those reviewed above (see in particular Tsimpli et al. 2004). However, even though the mental grammar of translators is yet to be explored, the existing studies suffice as indicators of the close relationship between translation and other bilingual situations, in particular second language acquisition and first language attrition. In the next section we report additional evidence along these lines.

3. **New evidence of problems in translation: Overuse of possessives**

3.1 **The marking of inalienable possession**

One of the key distinctions made in the domain of possessive relations is that between inalienable and alienable possession, i.e. between possessive relations that are intrinsically such, and those that are contingent. Cross-linguistically, it is very common for languages to have special morphological markers for each of the two types of possession. The languages of Europe at first sight seem exotic in not grammaticalising this difference in a parallel way, but closer inspection reveals that many of them do have trends that go in a similar direction (for a more detailed discussion see Stolz et al. 2008). Specifically, some European languages tend to omit possessive marking altogether with inalienably possessed nouns, replacing it with the definite article (provided that it is instantiated in the language). Moreover, a very pervasive areal trait is the use of the possessive dative construction, which typically encodes inalienable possession. As shown by the parallel sentences in (3) and (4), the two patterns of ‘lighter’ marking of inalienable possession are present for instance in Serbian, but absent in English, which must use its possessive adjectives in all contexts.

(3) a. Tina je podigla ₃ ruke / ?? svoju ruke - Tina raised her hand.
   b. Tina je zaboravila ₃ tašnu / ?? svoju tašnu kod kuće - Tina left her bag at home. ³

(4) a. Doktor mi je pregledao glavu / ?? Doktor je pregledao moju glavu - The doctor examined my head.
   b. Pokvario mu se frižider / ?? Njegov frižider se pokvario - His fridge broke down.

³ Serbian lacks articles, so it leaves inalienable possession completely unmarked.
the possessive relationship, but also by the meaning of the predicate and the wider sentential context (see Haspelmith 1999). Quite clearly, the choice of the strategy appropriate to any given context is dependent on multiple factors, representing a potentially problematic phenomenon for bilingual language acquisition and translation.

Indeed, several studies have found evidence of problems with the use of possessive adjectives in contexts where the languages involved were English on the one hand, and a language having the possessive dative and/or resorting to possessive omission on the other. In her study of contact-induced language change in the Los Angeles area, Silva-Corvalán (1996) found that, due to the influence of English, the Spanish of her heritage speaker informants was characterised by an overuse of possessive adjectives, so that they produced sentences such as (5), in which a possessive dative would be more appropriate (and is in fact used by speakers who were born and had lived in Mexico at least until puberty).

(5) ... y me dieron en la cara, y quebraron mi, mi jaw
   ... and they hit me in the face, and broke my, my jaw (Silva-Corvalán 1996: 122)

Furthermore, in a second language acquisition study Pérez-Leroux et al. (2002) looked at the judgements of native speakers of English on Spanish sentences expressing inalienable possession. They found that these learners had some problems accepting the target sentences, which contained unmarked and reflexive dative forms. Lastly, Liankina (2008) reports problems in the production of English learners of German, who rather consistently use possessive adjectives instead of the dative. In sum, the expression of inalienable possession appears to be yet another challenging phenomenon for bilingual speakers.

3.2 Inalienable possession in translation

Based on previous findings from the domains of translation studies and language acquisition, dealing with phenomena such as pronoun overuse, and based on the evidence of possessive adjective overuse in bilingual contexts, it can be hypothesised that possessive adjectives tend to be overused in translated texts as well. In order to test this hypothesis, we conducted a small-scale study that involved a comparative analysis of two books from J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone (HP1)* and *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince (HP6)*, and their Serbian translations.

The analysis was qualitative in nature, and consisted in the identification of instances of possessive adjective overuse in contexts of inalienable possession. Representative examples are reported in (6) - (10). Examples (6) to (8) represent the instances in which the possessive adjective could (and normally would)

4 A preliminary quantitative analysis was also performed to establish the overall frequencies of possessive adjectives in the books and to compare them to the frequencies that these elements have in monolingual non-translated corpora of English and Serbian. However, due to space constraints and some issues regarding corpus comparability we do not report the data here.
have been omitted. Examples (9) and (10) illustrate cases in which the possessive dative would have been more appropriate.

(6) a. Harry turned this news over in his mind. (HP1, 107)
   b. Hari je prevrtao ovu vest u svojoj glavi. (HP1, 93)

(7) a. Hermione had got both her breath and her bad temper back again. (HP1, 161)
   b. Hermioni se istovremeno povrašše i dah i njen prek karakter. (HP1, 138)

(8) a. “[...] She’s actually having trouble with her Metamorphosing!” [...] “She can’t change her appearance like she used to,” explained Hermione. (HP6, 95)
   b. – [...] Čak ima problema sa svojim metamorfozama! [...] – Ne može više da menja svoj izgled kao što je mogla – objasni Hermione. (HP6, 89-90)

(9) a. She closed her eyes and two large tears seeped from beneath her eyelids. (HP6, 32)
   b. Ona sklopi oči i dve ogromne suze potekoš ispod njenih kapaka. (HP6, 32)

(10) a. [...] he ducked and ran, headfirst, into the fight. His feet met something squarshy and slippery on the floor and he stumbled. (HP6, 598)
    b. On se sagn u i potrc a glavom  n apred u borbu. Njegova stopala ugaziše u nešto gnjecavo i klizavo na podu i on se zatetura. (HP6, 533)

These examples indicate that the overuse of possessives is indeed present in texts translated from English into Serbian. As is the case with overt subject overuse, the reported problematic sentences are not entirely ungrammatical, and they would probably be judged by most native speakers of Serbian as at least mildly acceptable, but they are not very likely to be used in spontaneous production.

In sum, even though we only report preliminary data, and a more extensive study is clearly needed in order to make stronger claims, the evidence that we have found seems to support the claim that acquisitional studies can help predict problems in translation. In the next section we turn to how this line of reasoning can be applied to translator education.

4. Pedagogical implications

The empirical data reviewed in this paper indicate that translated texts not only differ from non-translated ones, but they can in some aspects be seen as deviant. Even though this deviancy does not equal ungrammaticality, the subtle problems such as the ones described above can be detected by readers, and they tend to give translated texts the hint of ‘foreignness’ that is often discussed both in academic work and everyday life. Assuming that the degree of divergence

5 By a more extensive study we intend one that would be based on a larger corpus of translations, quantitatively compared to non-translated monolingual corpora, and that would include a more direct and more detailed comparison with second language acquisition, ideally performed by looking at learner corpora on the one hand and conducting psycholinguistic experiments on the other.
from the target system is an indicator of the quality of translation, problems such as overt subject or possessive adjective overuse are highly relevant for translation teaching and any efforts invested in trying to lower their rate seem justified.

The question that naturally comes to mind is whether the rate of occurrence of similar problems could be reduced through translator education, and if so, what type of education. We suggest that one way of achieving this goal is through a focus on the linguistic aspect of translator training. It has already been noted in the literature that language learning for translators has not received much attention in either translation studies or language acquisition research (see the papers in Malmkjær 2004). Moreover, linguistic training within translation courses is typically based on descriptive grammatical accounts, which usually comprise some form of contrastive analysis of the languages involved, with the focus on core morphosyntactic phenomena such as verbal tense and aspect or the use of articles (cf. González Davies 2004). On a more theoretical level, most attention appears to be given to the sub-disciplines of discourse analysis and text linguistics. However, as these two strands of interest clearly cannot account for all the problems found in translated texts, it seems desirable to extend the field of translators’ linguistic education further.

Given the similarity of the problems that occur in translation and bilingualism, bilingual language acquisition theory seems like a good candidate for linguistic education of future translators. Familiarity with problems that are common to various bilingual contexts could make future translators aware of the areas of grammar that are likely to cause difficulties in translation as well. The importance of the translation students’ awareness of interferences and negative transfer has been emphasised many times in the past (see e.g. González Davies 2004: 132), but an approach based on acquisitional theory has the advantage of having a wider and more readily generalisable perspective, seeking to identify types of phenomena that tend to be problematic cross-linguistically, rather than comparing isolated facts in specific pairs or groups of languages, as is mostly the case in the approach of contrastive grammar.

Furthermore, we believe that future research on translationese should not be based solely on translation corpora, but should in addition include an orientation towards the internal linguistic system of the translators. Such an approach would add an important new dimension to the research on distinctive features of translations, and would provide new input to translator education, because it would complement the traditional way of looking at translations as textual phenomena with a more cognitive perspective, focused on the translators’ mental grammars. This approach is schematically represented in Figure 1, in which the arrow on the left shows the current situation in translation research and translator education, while the two arrows on the right indicate the possibility (and need) of integrating the two empirical sides of the translation process, the text and the translator, both at the level of research, and the level of teaching.

6 It certainly is important in the translation market, as testified by adverts of numerous agencies, stating that good translations read as if they were originally written in the target language.
It is clear that this goal cannot be reached instantly, especially taking into account that even the field of second language pedagogy still remains somewhat disconnected from the theory of second language acquisition, but this does not mean that is not worth pursuing. Initial evidence exists of properties shared by translated texts, texts produced by second language learners and the mental grammars of bilingual speakers, and future research will hopefully also bring more knowledge about the mental grammars of translators, clarifying their status as attrited or not.

5. Conclusion

Even though based on a fairly small amount of data, our paper, in line with the papers by Cardinaletti (2004, 2005), indicates that a perspective in which the study of translation is seen as one aspect of the study of bilingual language acquisition can bring new and valuable insights not only to research on translationese, but also to translation teaching. However, even though the reported results confirm that similarities exist between translation and second language acquisition (or first language attrition), studies like these are perhaps better seen as an introduction to a new research paradigm in translation studies, a paradigm that should include not only more extensive quantitative analyses, work on larger corpora and more language pairs, but also acquisitional and psycholinguistic experiments involving translators. More cognitively oriented studies that compare translators with other bilingual language users will be able to provide more direct insight into the translators’ linguistic systems, bringing new data that could have significant implications for the educational context. And last but not least, such studies can help overcome a practical problem implied in work with translation corpora, namely the fact that the texts included in the corpora are in most cases carefully proofread before being made available to the public, which makes them not fully representative of the translators’ choices.
References


Fiction books quoted
