



Language Variation and Translation: a Theoretical Overview

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to describe some of the most common and effective strategies identified by language theorists and translators with reference to language variation phenomena. Language variation is a feature strictly correlated to the same nature of languages, which includes several notions (i.e. register, dialect, genre, style) that often overlap in their definitions, representing theoretical aspects of crucial importance in the context of language studies, particularly within the field of translation. Indeed, the ability of recognising language variation phenomena in a source language and of rendering them into the most adequate versions of a target language, is one of the major issues for translators, which requires a comprehensive and methodical linguistic awareness to face these important linguistic phenomena, both in specialist languages and literary fields. The following sections will be therefore dedicated to the description of some of the most common and effective strategies identified by language theorists, and thoroughly employed by translators, with reference to language variation, in order to suggest a clear overview and methodological approach through which prospective and novice translators could refer to.

Introduction

Language variation is a phenomenon strictly correlated to the same nature of language. It has been studied by many disciplines, in particular by linguistics and literary studies, and it includes several notions that

often overlap in their definitions. According to Biber¹, there are two main categories of language variations, namely: register, that includes language variations determined by specific situations, and dialect, that refers to language varieties associated with different groups of people on the basis of their social and/or geographical provenience. Crystal and Davy² make further distinctions in the field of language variation and focus on the concepts of genre, considered as a range of traditionally well recognised divisions in language, institutionally recognised in a society and made on the basis of external criteria or circumstances, and style, which refers to those aspects of language variation associated with specific social features and related to the linguistic habits of one person, or shared by a group of people, at the same time or over a period of time.

Notwithstanding a lack of general consensus in the use of common, theoretical, sociolinguistic definitions, the issue of language variation is extremely important in the context of language studies, particularly within the field of translation. Indeed, the translation of specific genres or registers that do not have similar correspondents in another target language or are characterised by very different linguistic, functional and/or structural features (e.g. medical prescriptions, legal documents etc.), the translation of dialects or the translation of specific linguistic traits that characterize the communicative style of an author, represent very frequent and crucial challenges for any translator. The ability of recognising language variation features in a source language and of rendering them into the most adequate versions of a target language, is one of the major issues for translators, which requires a comprehensive and methodical linguistic awareness to face any aspect of language variation, both in specialist languages and literary fields.

Hence, the following paragraphs will describe some of the most common and effective strategies identified by language theorists, and thoroughly employed by translators, with reference to language variation phenomena, focusing in particular on the notions of dialect, genre and register previously described, and the concept of style in a translational perspective³, in order to suggest a clear overview and methodological

¹ D. Biber, *Dimensions of Register Variation: A Cross Linguistic Comparison*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995.

² D. Crystal, D. Davy, *Investigating English Style*, Longman, London 1969.

³ The notion of style has been considered in a strictly translational perspective, that entails the outcomes of individual translators' habits or the so called "translationese" phenomenon (see next paragraphs and bibliographical references in notes 5 to 8).

approach through which prospective and novice translators could refer to, pointing out also some of the limits and altering effects of these translational techniques.

Language variation and translation: the challenge of translating dialectal features, textual genres and registers

The awareness of language variation phenomena and the ability to recognise its forms represent important linguistic skills not only for native speakers, but also for foreign learners of a specific language and for translators. As noted by Crystal and Davy, a foreigner needs to develop «a sense of style, [...] a semi-instinctive knowledge of linguistic appropriateness and taboo»⁴. This kind of linguistic awareness is crucial also for translators, whose professionalism can also be measured by the ability to recognise language variation phenomena within a specific source language and transpose them into their target language.

As mentioned in the previous section, studies on linguistic variation have not reached yet a unique common categorization. Moreover, research dedicated specifically to a translational approach in the field of language variation is mainly focused on single-case analyses and on the shifts between source text(s) and target text(s), or it illustrates comparative descriptions of textual genres across source and target language(s). Some studies in the field of translation and language variation have also focused on the phenomena related to the so called “style of translators” and “translation as a text-type”. More specifically, Baker observed that it is impossible to produce a stretch of language in a totally impersonal way and that translators have their own individual profile of linguistic habits and preferences, reflected in their translations through the employment of «specific lexical items, syntactic patterns, cohesive devices or even style of punctuation where other option may be equally available in the language»⁵. With reference to the features of translation as a text type, Olohan and Baker observed that translations into English show a high frequency in the use of the optional pattern *that* + *reporting verb*⁶. In a

⁴ D. Crystal, D. Davy, *Investigating English Style* cit., p.7.

⁵ M. Baker, *Towards a Methodology for Investigating the Style of a Literary Translator*, «Target», 12 (2000), pp. 241-266.

⁶ M. Olohan, M. Baker, *Reporting that in Translated English. Evidence for Subconscious Processes of Explicitation?*, «Across Languages and Cultures», 1 (2000), pp. 141-158.

different analysis, Olohan⁷ noticed also the tendency of avoiding contractions in English translations. Another study, conducted by Tirkkonen-Condit tried to identify those linguistic features that distinguish translated texts from original texts written in Finnish, which resulted in:

unnatural dialogue, unidiomatic and clumsy, 'un-Finnish' dialogue; short sentences and phrases which sound translated; long attributes and nominal structures; unusual or rare grammatical structure, word order or tense⁸.

The most comprehensive crosslinguistic research on language variation has been the multi-dimensional analysis on register variations conducted by Biber⁹, whose studies identified the existence of several universals of register variation across languages. More specifically, his research focused on four languages coming from very different linguistic families (English from Indo-European, Tuvaluan from Austronesian, Korean from Altaic and Somali from the Cushitic sub-family of Afroasiatic) and showed that languages have more similarities than differences. For example, from a synchronic perspective, he established that all four languages have «multiple dimensions reflecting basic oral/literate differences, the marking of interactivity, production circumstances and an informational focus» and that these dimensions are defined by «similar linguistic features and analogous registers [...] [with] quite similar cross-linguistic characterizations along these multiple dimensions»¹⁰. From a diachronic perspective, he demonstrated that when written registers are introduced in a language and during the early stages of their evolution, they are quite different from pre-existing spoken registers because they reflect a higher degree of literacy (greater structural and lexical elaboration, more informational integration and less structural reduction and interaction). In the later period of evolution though, only specialised written registers maintain strong literacy features, whereas the most popular written registers acquire the characteristics of orality (i.e. less structural and lexical elaboration, less density of structural integration, more interactivity and involvement)¹¹.

The existence of universal patterns of variation across languages represents a useful theoretical background in the field of translation studies, particularly for those cases in which it may seem impossible to reflect the source

⁷ M. Olohan, *How Frequent are the Contractions? A Study of Contracted Forms in the Translational English Corpus*, «Target», 15 (2003), pp. 59-89

⁸ S. Tirkkonen-Condit, *Translationese – a Myth or an Empirical Fact? A Study into the Linguistic Identifiability of Translated Language*, «Target», 14 (2002), pp. 207-220.

⁹ D. Biber, *Dimensions of Register Variation* cit.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 278.

¹¹ Ivi, pp. 311-313.

language peculiarities and its registers or stylistic variations into a specific target language. Such cases are the translation of dialects, genres and registers of communication which are very distant from the ones existing in the target language, or which sometimes are not even contemplated in it. If we exclude translation tasks in which adaptation is the actual purpose of translation (e.g.: adaptations of literary classics for children, in which the aim of the target text is to adapt complex genres and registers into less sophisticated linguistic codes, thus accessible to the target text addressees), language variation features should always be “faithfully” translated in order to convey the same connotations embodied in the source language, rather than being just transposed into simpler, or adapted, target language codes.

However, within language variation phenomena, the translation of dialectal features is probably one of the most challenging and demanding tasks for translators, who generally recur to strategies of simplification and standardization into their target texts. When a source text producer chooses to use dialect as a medium of expression, he/she is pursuing very well determined functions, such as the individualization of characters (including the employment of marked regional accents, both in literary and audiovisual texts), the definition of specific sociocultural contexts (e.g. the use of Scots in Irvine Welsh’s novels¹²), and the revaluation of minority languages and cultures (e.g. the Italian neo-dialectal poets that consider dialect as a way to react to the alienating effect of postwar industrial society, and as a linguistic testimony of cultural heritage and of the voices of the excluded and the oppressed¹³). These functions should, ideally, be preserved also in the corresponding target text, balancing semantic and communicative translational approaches¹⁴, in order to report as closely as possible the semantic and syntactic structures and the indented communicative effects of the original. However, most of the times, translators tend to apply «domesticating approaches»¹⁵, particularly when the cultural and power relationship between source and target language puts the source text in a «secondary position»¹⁶ with respect to the traditional forms and canons of the target language, thus

¹² M. Morini, *Norms, Difference, and the Translator: Or, How to Reproduce Double Difference*, «RiLUnE», 4 (2006), special issue, *Traduzione Tradizione? Paths in the European Literary Polysystem*, pp. 123-140.

¹³ L. Bonaffini, *Translating Dialect Literature*, «World Literature Today», 71 (1997), pp. 279-288.

¹⁴ P. Newmark, *Approaches to Translation*, Pergamon Press, Oxford 1981.

¹⁵ L. Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility. A History of Translation*, Routledge, Oxon and New York 2018.

¹⁶ I. Even-Zohar, *Papers in Culture Research*, http://www.tau.ac.il/~itamarez/ez_vita/ez-publications.htm, 2005 [last accessed: October 2006].

frequently translating dialects through the employment of target language standard varieties and strategies of lexical simplification, adaptation and/or even omission¹⁷, and inevitably altering the original linguistic characterization intended by the source text producer(s). As observed by Leppihalme, standardization has not only negative effects, since «the elements weakened or lost through standardisation, may not be so readily missed if the reading experience is satisfying in other ways»¹⁸ and the translator is able to compensate the “loss” by meeting the addressees’ expectations, who might not be interested in grasping the linguistic differences expressed through dialect but rather prefer to understand the main plot of the narrative.

Nonetheless, translators could recur to other strategies for the translation of dialects in order to maintain the functional and cultural implications intended with their use. Morini¹⁹, for instance, suggests three more creative methods for the translation of dialects, namely:

- the use of two or more registers of the target language;
- the translation into non-standard (incorrect, popular) variant of the target language;
- the creation of a synthetic target language, composed of incorrect or slightly modified words, phrases and regional terms and expressions phonetically adapted to the rules of the target language.

The effects of language variation can also be observed at the level of genre analysis and register. Every language has a range of textual genres and registers, associated with particular communicative situations and characterised by specific linguistic and structural features. Very often though, these features can vary across languages and there may not be linguistic equivalence in translation. At register level, this could include, for example, grammatical, lexical and syntactic features, such as the use of old English verbal forms in third person singular (*hath* or *saith*) or inflected second person singular (*speakest*), typical of English religious texts, or the use of the second person plural pronoun (*Voi*) and/or of the third person feminine pronoun (*Lei*), employed in formal communicative contexts in Italian and its regional variants. Concerning genres, textual typologies associated with particular situations may exist only in a specific source culture, and the target language may not have comparable genres to be employed in those communicative situations, such as, for instance, in the field of legal languages,

¹⁷ J.P. Vinay, J. Darbelnet, *Comparative Stylistics of French and English. A Methodology for Translation*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam and Philadelphia 1995 [1958].

¹⁸ R. Leppihalme, *The Two Faces of Standardization: On the Translation of Regionalisms in Literary Dialogue*, «The Translator», 6 (2000), p. 266.

¹⁹ M. Morini, *Norms, Difference, and the Translator* cit., pp.129-131.

which include certificates, documents and many other legal texts existing only in a specific legal system but not in others. Very often, textual genres are also characterised by culture-specific terminologies and lexical patterns that do not have corresponding equivalents in other languages, due to different social and/or legal systems (e.g. job titles and professions in the field of law, medicine, education and so on). Therefore, the translation of textual genres and culture-bound registers usually requires additional research for the translator, who needs to transpose the cultural and functional implications of the source text into a target language that may not contemplate similar textual genres and register varieties. In these cases, translators usually recur to communicative²⁰ and target-oriented functional approaches²¹, through strategies of standardization and simplification, but they could also resort to explicitation techniques, by stating the absence of corresponding equivalents in the target language or by glossing the source language features through lexical calques, borrowings or adaptation strategies²², thus potentially introducing new textual genres and related terminologies in the target language.

Conclusions

The ability to recognise the forms of language variation in a specific source language and translate them into another target language represents a crucial skill for any translator. Studies in this area though, even if they have been extensive and very detailed, have not reached yet a common and definite terminology. Consequently, it is often very difficult to correlate all the analyses dedicated to language variation phenomena and consequently follow a clear-cut approach to translation, both in specialist languages and literary fields.

This research has therefore tried to point out a series of considerations in order to offer a clearer overview of the most common and effective strategies related specifically to the translation of:

- dialectal features, which should be always, and ideally, preserved in translation, in order to maintain the original linguistic characterization intended by the source text producer(s), by balancing semantic and communicative translational approaches, limiting standardization techniques mainly to target-oriented translation commissions, and recurring to creative translation methods (i.e.:

²⁰ P. Newmark, *Approaches to Translation* cit.

²¹ C. Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity. Functionalist Approaches Explained*, St. Jerome, Manchester 1997.

²² J.P. Vinay, J. Darbelnet, *Comparative Stylistics of French and English* cit.

the use of two or more registers or non-standard variant(s) of the target language, or the creation of a synthetic target language, composed of incorrect or slightly modified words, phrases and regional terms and expressions phonetically adapted to the rules of the target language), particularly when the linguistic and cultural differences across source and target language are very wide.

- textual genres and communicative registers, which can extensively vary across languages in terms of communicative situations of use and related linguistic and structural features, thus requiring a peculiar attention on behalf of translators, who need to transpose the cultural and functional implications of the source text(s) into a target language that may not contemplate similar textual genres and register varieties. The translation of genre and registers features should usually be based on communicative and target-oriented approaches, through strategies of standardization, simplification or even explicitation, in order to perform and achieve the same functional communicative effects intended in the original context.

Far from being exhaustive, this study aimed at presenting a general outline of language variation issues and related translational implications, which, in future and more extensive research, could contemplate larger cross-linguistic comparisons, including specific examples of both literary and non-literary texts, in order to provide more complete and practical references for dealing professionally, coherently and consistently with the translation of language variation phenomena that today, more than ever, express our ongoing and systematic sociocultural changes.