

## *Improving the Product by Improving the Process: How to Reduce the Negative Impact of Interference in Translation*

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is first to present and analyse instances of backlash interference in translated texts produced by trainee translators. Assuming that the shift of focus from the translation product to the translation process may actually improve the former, I will also attempt to suggest certain measures, to be applied throughout the translation course, that will hopefully prevent errors resulting from backlash interference. The proposed measures and activities will hopefully contribute to enhanced translation training and improved competence of trainee translators.

**Keywords:** backlash interference, translation, translation error, translator training, process-oriented translation class

### 1. Introduction

Linguistic interference seems to be inevitable when one learns a foreign language or uses two or more languages on a daily basis as there is a natural tendency to transfer certain linguistic patterns from one language to another. Unfortunately, however, interference frequently leads to errors in language production and it has become one of the main problems faced by language learners and trainee translators alike. Although it seems that the typical direction of this transfer is from one's native language to a foreign one, it also occurs the other way round, the latter case being called *backlash interference*. This phenomenon is counter-intuitive since it seems that if one is a native speaker of a certain language, using it constantly on a daily basis, they should be able to produce a correct translation into this language. However, as I will try to demonstrate in this article, this is not always the case. In fact, the problem of backlash interference is considerable and needs to be addressed.

However, prior to presenting the results of corpus data analysis, it seems reasonable to briefly outline classifications of translation errors in order to see where interference errors fit in within them.

### 2. Translation errors

A translation error (Polish: *błąd tłumaczeniowy*) is defined by Tomaszkiwicz as: "an error occurring in the target text and resulting from insufficient knowledge or incorrect use of translation principles, translation rules, translation techniques, or

from not following the appropriate translation practices (...)" (Tomaszkiewicz, 2006: 30, transl. K.P.L.). It is worth noting that lapsology (the study of language errors) uses both terms: *language error* and *language mistake* (Kozłowska 2001:138), where the former is seen as resulting from the learner's lack of proper grammatical knowledge and the latter as being a failure to utilise a known system correctly. In translation into one's native language it seems that one should speak of mistakes rather than errors, but since Tomasziewicz in *Terminologia tłumaczenia* provides *error* as an equivalent of the Polish *błąd* in the context of translation (as quoted previously), this term will be used consistently throughout this article.

Dzierżanowska (1990: 77-101) proposed a classification of translation errors against the following criteria:

- orthography (spelling, punctuation);
- grammatical forms and constructions (morphological forms, elements of the clause structure, elements of the sentence structure);
- word order (at the clause level and sentence level);
- lexis (at the word level and clause level);
- adequacy (situational, stylistic and semantic adequacy).

This classification concerns a range of linguistic problems with the target language, and interference errors can occur at any of these levels. However, Hejwowski (2004:200) suggested focusing on the causes of errors and their sources in the entire translation process. Therefore, he perceived a translation error as falling into two main categories. One type can be spotted by the readers of the translation who do not compare it to the source text and may not even know the original language. These are target language errors that can easily be noticed by a native speaker, such as those mentioned by Dzierżanowska (1990): spelling, punctuation, grammar mistakes, and they should all be eliminated in the proof-reading stage of translation.

On the other hand, there are also errors which frequently escape notice of an ordinary reader, but can be detected by a professional translator or a critic, after comparing and analysing both the source and the target texts. They are unnoticed by readers if they do not disturb higher level text interpretation, that is, when they do not distort the overall plot or the image of the character. However, Hejwowski still considers them translation errors "(...) for they do not convey to the readers of the translation the meaning intended by the author and they prevent the target readers from interpreting these particular fragments of the original in a way similar to the readers of the original at least at some levels of analysis" (Hejwowski, 2004: 201). At the same time, Hejwowski states that all translation errors can be interesting and worth discussing, regardless of how noticeable they are, or how trivial they may appear to be.

According to Hejwowski (2004: 198-234), translation errors can be divided into the following categories:

- errors of syntagmatic translation – they may occur as a result of the translator’s insufficient knowledge of the source language and culture, which leads to various calques; such errors may stem for instance from choosing the most common dictionary equivalents, not knowing “false friends”, using the commonly accepted equivalents, calqueing a source language phrase or structure, unnecessary and unjustified borrowings of foreign words or phrases; it is this type of errors in which language interference and the resultant negative transfer are most noticeable and which are of primary concern of this article;
- misinterpretation errors – they result from the incorrect interpretation of the source text because of the translator’s insufficient knowledge of the source language and culture; these are: mistaking two source language syntagms or verb frames, misinterpreting scenes/scripts, misconstruing the text’s modality;
- realisation errors – errors of the target language, wrong evaluation of the target language readers’ knowledge, insufficient knowledge of the subject matter;
- meta-translation errors – they stem from the translator’s insufficient knowledge of the commonly accepted translation rules; these errors are: additions; omissions; two versions; using too many or too few footnotes; choosing the wrong translation technique, especially as regards the translation of weights and measurements, names and titles, using hypernyms; choosing the wrong translation strategy; corrections; changing the text’s intertextuality.

As Hejwowski noted, "translation may never attain perfectness, but as any human activity has to strive to attain it" (Hejwowski, 2004: 199). However, it can be argued that in order to be able to produce better translations, the trainee translators need to be aware of the phenomenon of interference and negative transfer as well as the areas they tend to affect.

### **3. Levels of interference**

It seems that interference is something inevitable, whether a person is a language learner, a bilingual speaker or a translator. As Łuczyński and Maćkiewicz point out: "(...) it is impossible to keep both languages in total isolation. They must interfere with one another and this interference concerns all levels of linguistic system: from phonological to syntactic" (Łuczyński and Maćkiewicz, 2002:111, transl. K.P.L.). Hence, interference can be identified at the following levels:

- lexical – at the level of lexical units, single words, for instance false friends, spelling (the use of small and capital letters);
- syntactic – at the syntax level, for instance calqueing the source language word order;
- phraseological – at the level of idiomatic expressions, fixed phrases, collocations;

- punctuation – for instance in the use of quotation marks, commas, dashes, way of writing dialogues, numbers, addresses, etc.

Instances of backlash interference and the resultant negative transfer at all the above levels will be analysed in the following sections of the article.

#### **4. The procedure of data collection**

In order to collect data for analysis, I asked 30 Polish undergraduate students in the second year of a translation programme at the English Philology, to translate a short text on a tourism-related topic, from English into Polish:

Why Hula When You Can Bula?

When Americans think about tropical paradise, their minds turn to Hawaii. But those in search of sun and island escapes — not crowds and high-end department stores — might want to think about visiting other areas of the South Pacific. For a more affordable, more authentic experience, just say “Bula” — the official greeting of Fiji.

The Republic of the Fiji Islands is a nation in the South Pacific known for its rich natural resources, scenery and friendly people. Those looking for white-sand beaches and bright blue waters will not be disappointed. The islands are surrounded by soft coral reefs, which provide a breathtaking underwater spectacle. Visitors can enjoy many one-of-a-kind adventures in a nation less expensive than many in the South Pacific.

Visitors to Hawaii are often surprised by the amount of development that has taken place on the islands. In Fiji, however, it is still possible to get back to nature. For example, Koro Sun Resort & Rainforest Spa, an all-inclusive getaway on the island of Vanua Levu, situates its guests within 150 acres of tropical paradise. Surrounded by a coconut plantation, lavish rainforests and a private lagoon, the resort offers its visitors a more authentic native experience than can be found at any staged luau.

(NewsUSA, no date)

The text contained 3 footnotes that the students were instructed not to translate but they were supposed to use the information included in them during translation. They were given about an hour to complete the task and they were allowed to use all the available sorts of translation aids: dictionaries, smartphones and laptops with Internet access.

#### **5. The analysis**

The results of the students’ translations demonstrate that virtually every single sentence of the source text contained a potential translation problem which could lead to an incorrect translation due to various types of backlash interference. Therefore, selected incorrect translations of some of the source text sentences are subject to analysis in this section, each marked with an asterisk. For each

translation, the type of interference is specified and a suggested translation is provided, which is either mine or was selected from those student translations that I considered successful. However, it should be emphasised here that these are by no means the only acceptable translations.

### Lexical interference

#### Sentence 11

(...) *the resort offers its visitors a more authentic native experience than can be found at any staged luau.*

luau – a traditional Hawaiian party or feast that is usually accompanied by entertainment

\* resort oferuje najbardziej naturalne doświadczenie, nawet bardziej autentyczne od zainscenizowanych Hawajskich festiwali.

\* ośrodek zapewni swoim wizytatorom większą rodzimość i autentyczność doświadczeń, niż ta, którą oferują sąsiednie odpowiedniki.

**Suggested translation:** ośrodek zapewnia gościom o wiele lepszy kontakt z lokalną kulturą niż jakakolwiek hawajska uczta luau.

In the first example quoted there are two instances of lexical interference: the English *resort* and the Polish *resort* are false friends (although the Polish word *resort* is now becoming accepted as a synonym of *kurort*), but there is yet another error that can be ascribed to this type of interference, too: the student used the information about *luau* included in the footnote of the original text, but automatically copied the English spelling, not taking into consideration the fact that nationality adjectives are in Polish spelled with a small letter, not a capital one like in English.

In the second translation the word *wizytator* was chosen by the student as an equivalent of the English *visitor* but these two words are in fact false friends. The Polish *wizytator* is used to refer to a state official who inspects various institutions, for instance schools. Hence this particular error is a result of lexical interference.

### Syntactic interference

#### Sentence 2

*But those in search of sun and island escapes*

\* Ci w poszukiwaniu słońca i ucieczki na wyspę

**Suggested translation:** Jednak ci, którzy spragnieni są słońca i marzą o odpoczynku na urokliwej wyspie

*might want to think about visiting other areas of the South Pacific.*

\* mogliby pomyśleć o odwiedzeniu innych obszarów Południowego Pacyfiku.

\* powinni zastanowić się nad odwiedzeniem pozostałych obszarów Południowego Pacyfiku.

**Suggested translation:** powinni rozważyć podróż w inne rejony Południowego Pacyfiku.

In the first part of this sentence the student translated word-for-word and copied the original word order, which resulted in an unnatural expression. In the second part of the sentence, although the Polish collocations are formed correctly, they do not sound natural in the entire sentence. In all these examples the students selected the most common dictionary equivalents of the original English collocations and combined them while preserving the original word order. The end result is expressions which sound awkward and somewhat clumsy in Polish.

### Phraseological interference

#### Sentence 6

*The islands are surrounded by soft coral reefs, which provide a breathtaking underwater spectacle.*

\* Wyspy otoczone są przez delikatne rafy koralowe, które dostarczają zapierające tchu w piersiach podwodne widowisko.

**Suggested translation:** Wyspy otaczają miękkie rafy koralowe, które tworzą zapierający dech w piersiach podwodny krajobraz.

Here, the student chose *dostarczać* as the equivalent of *provide*, which does not collocate with *widowisko*. At the same time they made another error proving that they had insufficient knowledge of Polish idiomatic expressions: *\*zapierające tchu w piersiach* should be changed into *zapierające dech w piersiach*.

#### Sentence 7

*Visitors can enjoy many one-of-a-kind adventures in a nation less expensive than...*

\* Odwiedzający mogą cieszyć się wieloma jedynymi w swoim rodzaju przygodami w kraju mniej drogim/kosztownym niż...

**Suggested translation:** Turyści mogą tu przeżyć wiele niezapomnianych przygód za cenę niższą od/ za cenę bardziej przystępną niż/ w kraju atrakcyjniejszym cenowo niż...

Although the English phrase *enjoy adventures* sounds natural, one cannot say the same about its literal Polish translation: *cieszyć się przygodami*. Hence, this particular non-existent collocation is a result of phraseological interference. The same type of interference and error of syntagmatic translation can be spotted in a later part of this sentence: *w kraju mniej drogim niż*, which sounds clumsy, particularly with regard to the phrase *mniej drogim*. A native speaker of Polish would simply say *tańszym* (English: *cheaper*). However, in this particular case the word is not necessary to express the source text message. In fact, it seems much better to add, for instance, the word *cena*, and reformulate the sentence, so that it sounds natural and is stylistically acceptable.

### Sentence 10

[the resort] *situates its guests within 150 acres of tropical paradise*

- \*sytuuje swoich gości
- \*usytuawia swoich gości
- \*usadowia swoich gości
- \*rezyduje swoich gości
- \*umieszcza swoich gości
- \*mieści swoich gości
- \*kwateruje swoich gości
- \*gości swoich gości

**Suggested translation:** oferuje gościom [ponad 600 tys. m<sup>2</sup> tropikalnego raj] /  
goście mają do dyspozycji [ponad 600 tys. m<sup>2</sup> tropikalnego raj]

In this fragment the students proved particularly “creative” when trying to come up with the equivalent of the phrase *situates its guests*. Unfortunately, all these instances are results of phraseological interference – the students translated literally and created collocations which do not exist in Polish.

### Sentence 11

*Surrounded by a coconut plantation, lavish rainforests (...)*

- \*Otoczony przez kokosową plantację, wystawny las tropikalny (...)
- \*Otoczony przez kokosowe plantacje, sowite lasy deszczowe (...)

**Suggested translation:** Otoczony plantacją kokosów, bujnym/gęstym lasem deszczowym (...)

In these examples neither the word *wystawny*, nor *sowity* collocates with the word *las*, although both of them are possible equivalents of the English word *lavish*.

## 6. Conclusions

There were many more instances of backlash interference in the students’ translations but even this small sample allows us to draw some conclusions and formulate certain implications for teachers of translation.

*Practice translation with the use of parallel texts.* Students would certainly benefit from exercises with the use of parallel texts. These are texts which have originally been written in a certain language, and they can show how to correctly formulate a text in this language as well as constitute an excellent source of terminology, collocations and other expressions typical of a certain subject or field of study. They provide a great assistance before starting the translation.

*Teach students to effectively use dictionaries and online sources.* The results of the analysis as well as observation of students during the task demonstrated that the students either did not use dictionaries at all or failed to use them effectively. This not only concerns dictionaries of English, but also native language dictionaries, which are frequently underestimated in translation classes. Therefore, translation

classes should incorporate exercises in which the students would have to use Polish dictionaries – not only spelling dictionaries but also dictionaries of synonyms and antonyms, idioms, fixed phrases, collocations, punctuation, etc.

*Make students aware of false friends.* The students need to be made aware of the existence of false friends and other instances of interference and negative transfer in translation. Examples of such a negative transfer might be collected and given to groups of students who would have to identify instances of interference and correct them. Then they could be asked to share their ideas with other students saying what problems they encountered during this task, what was most difficult for them and which solution they chose in a particular situation – in this way the focus is not only on the final product – the corrected text – but also, and most importantly, on the translation process.

And this shift of focus from the product to the process is something I would recommend for the entire translation course.

*Make translation classes process-oriented rather than product-oriented.* Piecychna (2013), in her article about translating culinary recipes, recommends shifting the focus of translation classes from the product to the actual translation process and proposes the following stages:<sup>1</sup>

#### **Procedure:**

##### Warm-up

1. Introducing the type of text to be translated (e.g. non-literary, information text, area: tourism);
2. The students try to define the term “information text” (pairwork);
3. Brainstorming: the students try to come up with words and expressions that are likely to be found in information texts on tourism.

##### Introductory activities with the use of parallel texts

1. Comparing Polish and English information texts on tourism in terms of:
  - the conventions used;
  - the texts’ components and their order;
  - the accompanying illustrations;
  - the differences in terms of titles, forms of addressing the reader, devices used to attract the reader, presentation of the author’s subjective view, etc.
  - cultural differences.
2. Discussion.

##### Translation proper:

1. Preliminary analysis of the English text:
  - What is the purpose of the text?
  - Who is the target reader?
  - What is the text’s register?
2. Further analysis of the English text:

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<sup>1</sup> On the basis of: Piecychna, Beata 2013 „<<Pyszne>> tłumaczenie, czyli jak uczyć przekładu przepisów kulinarnych z języka angielskiego na język polski” [In:] *Rocznik Przekładoznawczy 8 Studia nad teorią, praktyką i dydaktyką przekładu*, pp. 195-210.

- Which bits are the most challenging to translate? (e.g. the title, the stylistic devices used to attract the reader, the measurement units) + suggest solutions
  - Which words and expressions are most problematic to translate? + suggest the equivalents
3. Translation of the English text into Polish;
  4. Discussion.

Homework assignment:

Translation of another information text on tourism – translate the text and write down the problems encountered as well as the solutions chosen.

The process-oriented approach seems to be more beneficial to the students than the product-oriented one. It allows the teacher to better motivate the students to be self-aware and introspective when translating and it encourages them to share their ideas, doubts and problems with both the teacher and the fellow students at each stage of translation. In this way the students are likely to develop the skill of introspection, which, in turn, will lead to better thought-out translations, instead of automatic ones, based on a selection of the first dictionary equivalents. Thus, focusing the translation classes on the translation process is likely to lead to better translation products, that is the translated texts.

### **5. Introduce the course of Polish stylistics into the curriculum**

The analysis of the linguistic and stylistic mistakes presented shows that apart from translation classes the students need a proper course in Polish stylistics conducted alongside the course of English stylistics, or, a course in comparative Polish-English stylistics. It is important that during this course the students have the opportunity to do not only stylistic and spelling exercises, but also exercises in: punctuation, idiomatic expressions, identifying and correcting mistakes, formulating correct texts in both English and Polish, finding synonyms and antonyms, identifying various registers in both English and Polish as well as exercises in typography, i.e. writing numbers, dates, hours, years and centuries, measurement units and addresses, in both English and Polish.

It seems that by implementing at least some of these suggestions and especially by focusing classes more on the translation process rather than the final product, a numerous errors resulting from backlash interference might be prevented. This will, in turn, lead to enhanced translation training, improved competence of trainee translators and finally, better translation products.

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