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TRANSLATION SHIFTS

BY “SHIFTS” WE mean departures from formal correspondence in the process of going from the SL (source language) to the TL (target language). Two major types of “shifts” occur: *level shifts* (1.1) and *category shifts* (1.2).

1.1 *Level shifts*. By a shift of level we mean that a SL item at one linguistic level has a TL translation equivalent at a different level.

We have already pointed out that translation between the levels of phonology and graphology—or between either of these levels and the levels of grammar and lexis—is impossible. Translation between these levels is absolutely ruled out by our theory, which posits “relationship to the same substance” as the necessary condition of translation equivalence. We are left, then, with shifts from *grammar* to *lexis* and vice-ver sa as the only possible level shifts in translation; and such shifts are, of course, quite common.

1.11 Examples of level shifts are sometimes encountered in the translation of the verbal aspects of Russian and English. Both these languages have an aspectual opposition—of very roughly the same type—seen most clearly in the “past” or *preterite* tense: the opposition between Russian *imperfective* and *perfective* (e.g. *pisal* and *napisal*), and between English *simple* and *continuous* (*wrote* and *was writing*).

There is, however, an important difference between the two aspect systems, namely that the *polarity of marking* is not the same. In Russian, the (contextually) marked term in the system is the *perfective*; this explicitly refers to the *uniqueness* or *completion* of the event. The *imperfective* is unmarked—ther words it is relatively neutral in these respects (the event may or may not actually be unique or completed, etc., but at any rate the imperfective is indifferent to these features—does not explicitly refer to this “perfectiveness”).¹

In English, the (contextually and morphologically) marked term is the *continuous*; this explicitly refers to the development, the *progress*, of the event. The “simple” form is neutral in this respect (the event may or may not actually be in progress, but the simple form does not explicitly refer to this aspect of the event).

We indicate these differences in the following diagram, in which the marked terms in the Russian and English aspect systems are enclosed in rectangles:

Event		
in progress	repeated	unique, completed
pisal		napisal
was writing		wrote

1.12 One result of this difference between Russian and English is that Russian *imperfective* (e.g. *pisal*) is translatable with almost equal frequency by English *simple* (*wrote*) or *continuous* (*was writing*). But the *marked* terms (*napisal*—*was writing*) are mutually untranslatable.

A Russian writer can create a certain contrastive effect by using an imperfective and then, so to speak, “capping” this by using the (marked) perfective. In such a case, the same effect of explicit, contrastive, reference to *completion* may have to be translated into English by a change of lexical item. The following example² shows this:

Čto že *delal* Bel'tov v prodolženie etix des'ati let? Vse il počti vse. Čto on *sdelal*? Ničego ili počti ničego.

Here the imperfective, *delal*, is “capped” by the perfective *sdelal*. *Delal* can be translated by either *did* or *was doing*—but, since there is no contextual reason to make explicit reference to the *progress* of the event, the former is the better translation. We can thus say “What *did* Beltov *do*...?” The Russian perfective, with its marked insistence on *completion* can cap this effectively: “What did he *do and complete*?” But the English marked term insists on the *progress* of the event, so cannot be used here. (“What *was* he *doing*” is obviously inappropriate.) In English, in this case, we must use a different lexical verb: a *lexical* item which includes reference to completion in its contextual meaning, e.g. *achieve*.³ The whole passage can thus be translated:

What did Beltov do during these ten years? Everything, or almost everything. What did he achieve? Nothing, or almost nothing.

1.13 Cases of more or less incomplete shift from grammar to lexis are quite frequent in translation between other languages. For example, the English: *This text is intended for...* may have as its French TL equivalent: *Le présent Manuel s'adresse à...* Here the SL modifier, *This*—a term in a *grammatical*

system of deictics—has as its TL equivalent the modifier *Le présent*, an article+a lexical adjective. Such cases are not rare in French, cf. also *This may reach you before I arrive=Fr. Il se peut que ce mot vous parvienne avant mon arrivée*. Once again the grammatical item *this* has a partially lexical translation equivalent *ce mot*.⁴

1.2 *Category shifts*. We referred to *unbounded* and *rank-bound* translation: the first being approximately “normal” or “free” translation in which SL-TL equivalences are set up at whatever rank is appropriate. Usually, but not always, there is sentence-sentence equivalence,⁵ but in the course of a text, equivalences may shift up and down the rank-scale, often being established at ranks lower than the sentence. We use the term “rank-bound” translation only to refer to those special cases where equivalence is *deliberately limited* to ranks below the sentence, thus leading to “bad translation”—i.e. translation in which the TL text is either not a normal TL form at all, or is not relatable to the same situational substance as the SL text.

In normal, unbounded, translation, then, translation equivalences may occur between sentences, clauses, groups, words and (though rarely) morphemes. The following is an example where equivalence can be established to some extent right down to morpheme rank:

Fr.	SL text	J’ai laissé mes lunettes sur la table
Eng.	TL text	I’ve left my glasses on the table

Not infrequently, however, one cannot set up simple equal-rank equivalence between SL and TL texts. An SL *group* may have a TL *clause* as its translation equivalent, and so on.

Changes of rank (unit-shifts) are by no means the only changes of this type which occur in translation; there are also changes of *structure*, changes of *class*, changes of *term* in systems, etc. Some of these—particularly *structure-changes*—are even more frequent than rank-changes.

It is changes of these types which we refer to as *category-shifts*. The concept of “category-shift” is necessary in the discussion of translation; but it is clearly meaningless to talk about category-shift unless we assume some degree of formal correspondence between SL and TL; indeed this is the main justification for the recognition of formal correspondence in our theory. Category-shifts are *departures from formal correspondence* in translation.

We give here a brief discussion and illustration of category-shifts, in the order *structure-shifts*, *class-shifts*, *unit-shifts* (rank-changes), *intra-system-shifts*.

1.21 *Structure-shifts*. These are amongst the most frequent category shifts at all ranks in translation; they occur in *phonological* and *graphological* translation as well as in *total translation*.

1.211 In *grammar*, structure-shifts can occur at all ranks. The following English-Gaelic instance is an example of *clause-structure shift*.

SL text	<i>John loves Mary</i>	=SPC
TL text	<i>Tha gradh aig Iain air Mairi</i>	=PSCA

(A rank-bound word-word back-translation of the Gaelic TL text gives us: *Is love at John on Mary*).

We can regard this as a structure-shift only on the assumption that there is formal correspondence between English and Gaelic. We must posit that the English elements of clause-structure S, P, C, A have formal correspondents S, P, C, A in Gaelic; this assumption appears reasonable, and so entitles us to say that a Gaelic PSCA structure as translation equivalent of English SPC represents a *structure-shift* insofar as it contains different elements.

But the Gaelic clause not only contains different elements—it also places two of these (S and P) in a different sequence. Now, if the sequence \overrightarrow{SP} were the only possible sequence in English (as \overleftarrow{PS} is in Gaelic) we could ignore the *sequence* and, looking only at the particular elements, S and P, say that the English and Gaelic structures were the same as far as *occurrence* in them of S and P was concerned. But sequence *is* relevant in English and we therefore count it as a feature of the structure, and say that, in this respect, too, structure-shift occurs in the translation.

1.212 Another pair of examples will make this point clearer by contrasting a case where structure-shift occurs with one where it does not.

A. English	The man	/	is	/	in the boat
	S		P		A
					A
Gaelic	Tha	/	an duine	/	anns a' bhata
	P		S		A

and

B. English	Is	/	the man	/	in the boat?
	P		S		A
	P		S		A
Gaelic	Am bheil	/	an duine	/	anns a' bhata?
	P		S		A

In B, there is complete formal correspondence of clause-structure (no structure-shift): in A, there is a structure-shift at clause-rank.

These two examples, in fact, provide us with a commutation which establishes the following translation equivalences:

A. English	(\overrightarrow{SP})	Gaelic	V^A at P
B. English	(\overleftarrow{SP})	Gaelic	V^I at P

In other words, the Gaelic translation equivalent of the English sequence→of S and P in clause-structure is the occurrence in Gaelic of a verbal group of the class *Affirmative* as exponent of P; the Gaelic translation equivalent of the English

sequence ← of S and P in clause-structure is the occurrence in Gaelic of a verbal group of the class *Interrogative* as exponent of P.

These two examples in fact illustrate two different types of translation-shift; in A, there is structure-shift; in B, there is unit-shift, since in this case the Gaelic equivalent of a feature at *clause* rank is the selection of a particular term in a system operating at *group* rank.

1.213 Structure-shifts can be found at other ranks, for example at group rank. In translation between English and French, for instance, there is often a shift from MH (modifier+head) to (M)HQ ((modifier +) head+qualifier), e.g. *A white house* (MH) *Une maison blanche* (MHQ).

1.22 *Class-shifts*. Following Halliday, we define a *class* as “that grouping of members of a given unit which is defined by operation in the structure of the unit next above”. Class-shift, then, occurs when the translation equivalent of a SL item is a member of a different class from the original item. Because of the logical dependence of class on structure (of the unit at the rank above) it is clear that structure-shifts usually entail class-shifts, though this may be demonstrable only at a secondary degree of delicacy.

For example, in the example given in 1.213 above (*a white house=une maison blanche*), the translation equivalent of the English *adjective* “white” is the French adjective “blanche”. Insofar as both “white” and “blanche” are exponents of the formally corresponding class *adjective* there is apparently no class-shift. However, at a further degree of delicacy we may recognize two sub-classes of adjectives; those operating at M and those operating at Q in Ngp [Noun group] structure. (Q-adjectives are numerous in French, very rare in English.) Since English “white” is an M-adjective and French “blanche” is a Q-adjective it is clear that the shift from M to Q entails a class-shift.

In other cases, also exemplified in the translation of Ngps from English to French and vice-versa, class-shifts are more obvious: e.g. Eng. *a medical student*= Fr. *un étudiant en médecine*. Here the translation equivalent of the adjective *medical*, operating at M, is the adverbial phrase *en médecine*, operating at Q; and the lexical equivalent of the adjective *medical* is the noun *médecine*.

1.23 *Unit-shift*. By unit-shift we mean changes of rank—that is, departures from formal correspondence in which the translation equivalent of a unit at one rank in the SL is a unit at a different rank in the TL.

We have already seen several examples of unit shift in what precedes. A more appropriate term might be “rank-shift”, but since this has been assigned a different, technical, meaning within Halliday’s theory of grammar we cannot use it here.

1.24 *Intra-system shift*. In a listing of types of translation-shift, such as we gave in 1.2 above, one might expect “system-shift” to occur along with the names of the types of shift affecting the other fundamental categories of grammar—unit, structure and class. There is a good reason for not naming one of our types of shift “system-shift”, since this could only mean a departure from formal correspondence in which (a term operating in) one system in the SL has as its translation equivalent (a term operating in) a different—non-corresponding—system in the TL. Clearly, however, such shifts from one *system* to another are always entailed by unit-shift or class-shift. For instance, in

example B in 1.212 the Gaelic equivalent of English clause-structure *PS* is shown to be selection of a particular class of Verbal group (V^1). We could say that here there is a system-shift, since *PS*, a term in a system of clause-classes, is replaced by V^1 , a term in a (formally non-corresponding) system of *Vgp* classes. There is no need to do this, however, since such a shift is already implied by the *unit-shift*.

We use the term *intra-system shift* for those cases where the shift occurs *internally*, within a system; that is, for those cases where SL and TL possess systems which approximately correspond formally as to their constitution, but when translation involves selection of a non-corresponding term in the TL system.

It may, for example, be said that English and French possess formally corresponding systems of *number*. In each language, the system operates in *nominal groups*, and is characterized by concord between the exponents of S and P in clauses and so on. Moreover, in each language, the system is one of two terms—*singular* and *plural*—and these terms may also be regarded as formally corresponding. The exponents of the terms are differently distributed in the two languages—e.g. Eng. *the case/the cases* Fr. *le cas/les cas*—but as terms in a number system *singular* and *plural* correspond formally at least to the extent that in both languages it is the term *plural* which is generally regarded as morphologically marked.

In translation, however, it quite frequently happens that this formal correspondence is departed from, i.e. where the translation equivalent of English *singular* is French *plural* and vice-versa.

e.g.

advice	=	des conseils
news	=	des nouvelles
lightning	=	des éclairs
applause	=	des applaudissements
trousers	=	le pantalon
the dishes	=	la vaisselle
the contents	=	le contenu etc. ⁶

Again, we might regard English and French as having formally corresponding systems of deictics, particularly *articles*; each may be said to have four articles, *zero*, *definite*, *indefinite* and *partitive*. It is tempting, then, to set up a formal correspondence between the terms of the systems as in this table:

	French	English
<i>Zero</i>	–	–
<i>Definite</i>	le, la, 1', les	the
<i>Indefinite</i>	un, une	a, an
<i>Partitive</i>	du, de la, de 1', des	some, any

In translation, however, it sometimes happens that the equivalent of an article is not the formally corresponding term in the system:

e.g.		
Il est—professeur.		He is <i>a</i> teacher.
Il a <i>la</i> jambe cassée.		He has <i>a</i> broken leg.
L'amour		Love
<i>Du</i> vin		Wine

In the following table we give the translation-equivalents of French articles found in French texts with English translations. The number of cases in which a French article has an English equivalent at word-rank is 6958, and the figures given here are percentages; the figure 64.6 against *le* for instance, means that the French definite article (*le, la, l', les*) has the English definite article as its translation equivalent in 64.6% of its occurrences.⁷ By dividing each percentage by 100 we have equivalence-probabilities—thus we may say that, within the limitations stated above, French *le*, etc., will have Eng. *the* as its translation equivalent with probability 65.

French	English				
	zero	the	some	a	(other)
zero	67.7	6.1	0.3	11.2	4.6
le	14.2	64.6	—	2.4	18.9
du	51.3	9.5	11.0	5.9	22.4
un	6.7	5.8	2.2	70.2	15.1

It is clear from this table that translation equivalence does not entirely match formal correspondence. The most striking divergence is in the case of the French partitive article, *du*, the most frequent equivalent of which is *zero* and not *some*. This casts doubt on the advisability of setting up *any* formal correspondence between the particular terms of the English and French article-systems.

Notes

- 1 My attention was first drawn to this difference between English and Russian by Roman Jakobson in a lecture which he gave in London in 1950.
- 2 From *Herzen*, cited by Unbegaun in *Grammaire Russe*, p. 217.
- 3 Another possibility would be “What *did* he get done?”, but this would be stylistically less satisfactory.
- 4 Examples from Vinay et Darbelnet, *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais*, p. 99.
- 5 W.Freeman Twaddell has drawn my attention to the fact that in German-English translation, equivalence may be rather frequently established between the German *sentence* and an English unit greater than the sentence, e.g. *paragraph*.
- 6 cf. Vinay et Darbelnet, pp. 119–23.
- 7 I am indebted to Dr. R.Huddleston for this information.