

A MICRO-UNIT IN TRANSLATION PEDAGOGY

Uma Micro-Unidade na Pedagogia da Tradução

Eine Mikro-Einheit in der Pädagogik der
Übersetzung

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SUMMARY

In this text there is a discussion about materials needed for teaching translation at university level. Our case study is the translation of the English Present Perfect. The semantics of verbal tenses both in English and Portuguese is dealt with so as to allow us to make some claims about how one should tackle the problem of translating the perfect tenses to express the rhetorical function of reporting past literature in academic language.

RESUMO

Neste texto discutimos alguns materiais para o ensino de tradução a nível universitário. Exemplificamos com a tradução do «Present Perfect». A semântica dos tempos verbais em inglês e português é examinada de modo a nos permitir sugerir algumas formas de abordar o problema de traduzir os «perfect tenses» para expressar a função retórica de relatar o que já foi feito no passado, na área da literatura académica em questão.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims at making a contribution to the discussion about materials needed for teaching translation at university level. In Brazil it is not uncommon for technical books to be translated by non-professional translators (as, for example, when medical books are translated by medical staff, either resident doctors or teaching assistants in universities). It is to meet demands of, this kind of personnel that introductory linguistic materials, such as the one exemplified in this paper, are designed. They rely, if we may say so, on a program of 'sensitization' to linguistic approaches, from which prospective translators may benefit.

Our case study is the translation of the English Present Perfect into Portuguese equivalent tenses. Due to some differences in the two language systems, it seems natural to have certain general characteristics of the translation of this tense deliberately pointed out to students as part of a necessary linguistic feedback, so that they can feel more comfortable about their work. We have, however, no intention of exhausting all contexts and possibilities of translating the Present Perfect. Only a specific context was aimed at, namely, the Present Perfect with the rhetorical function of reporting past literature in academic language (see

Oster, 1981) (examples in sentences (1) and (2) ahead). Thus, this is a proposal for a methodological approach which may be further expanded and applied to the study of the translation of other items in the language.

2. REPORTING PAST LITERATURE: A RHETORICAL FUNCTION

2.1 *Syntactic Patterns in the Source Language*

Oster (1981) examines two articles from the magazine *Chemical Engineering Science*, focusing on the use of verbal tenses to express the rhetorical function of reporting past literature in academic language (other rhetorical functions would be, for example, giving directives, exemplifying). In her data, the Present Perfect, when used to report past literature, shows up in two types of sentences, one type 'active' and another 'passive', as in the following examples:¹

- (1) 'Gelperin et al. *have concluded* that...' (p. 80)
- (2) 'oscillations *have been observed* in recent studies (p. 78)

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Taking up her findings, I set out to do some more research on this topic and, interestingly, I saw the same type of Present Perfect being used to report past literature (PPRPL) in two other texts: *General Urology* (Smith, 1975) and *Treatment of Shock* (Schumer, 1974). From the first book, I have examined the initial 133 occurrences of the Present Perfect, having found 41 occurrences of PPRPL. From the second one, I have examined the initial 140 occurrences of the Present Perfect. Here, I have found 58 occurrences of PPRPL. With the help of this sample, small as it may appear, I have ventured into the study of some facts related to the choice of verb tense and the related topic of word order. This choice becomes evident when we compare the English texts mentioned above with their translations in Portuguese. As my objective is not the one of drawing statistically valid conclusions from the data, but that of proposing a pedagogic micro-unit for the teaching of translation, I feel comfortable about using the data only as a source for ideas.

Two types of sentences with PPRPL show up when one examines Oster's data. These also showed up in my data. To those two types can be added another which did not show up in the articles examined by Oster but did so in my data. As in the sentence

- (3) 'it *has been shown* that fibrogen is produced very rapidly'

It may be helpful to represent the sentences diagrammatically in the following three patterns (which correspond to sentences (1), (2) and (3), respectively):

(Active sentence) —

Passive sentence —
with nominal
subject)

(Passive sentence —
with sentential
subject)

I Subject HAVE -en (that) Object

II Subject HAVE BEEN -en

III it HAS BEEN -en (that) Subject

(where -en is the past participle of the main verb in the clause)

2.2 A Micro-Unit for Teaching Translation

If I am not wrong in assuming that the translation of the Present Perfect so considered will make a good micro-unit for the teaching of translation, the presentation of those three patterns to students

through examples can function as step one. The class should be able to see them as elements used in situations where the Present Perfect is used with the rhetorical function of reporting past literature. They should also be able to produce them, when required to do so by the teacher. However, at all times, it must be evident to students that other verb tenses can also be used to report past literature in academic English, as in

- (4) Hugo and Jacobith *suggested* that...
(5) a complete description is *given* by Simpson

Thus, the micro-unit proposed here could be part of a larger unit which would deal with the translation of the rhetorical function of reporting past literature, to be seen also with other tenses besides the Present Perfect. It is a question of working up to details, by gradually increasing the field of analysis.

3. ENGLISH-PORTUGUESE CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

3.1 *Semantics of the English Present Perfect and of the Portuguese Compound Present*

If we move on to the actual comparison of the two language systems, we see that there is only a partial *semantic* correspondence between the English Present Perfect and its corresponding Portuguese Compound Present, although there is a total *formal* correspondence:

- (6) E: I *have worked* ...
P: Eu *tenho trabalhado*...

To further explore this semantic difference, some nuances of meaning which can accompany the Present Perfect must be studied. Dubois (1972) sees three such nuances as possible secondary meanings to the Present Perfect: *Single event*: 'I have read a book'; *iterative*: 'I have read this book twice'; *continuative*: 'I have lived here since 1970' (For our purpose, the crucial distinction will be the one between *single event* and *iterative/continuative*.² Now, the meaning of both English Present Perfect and Portuguese Compound Present may coincide when there is an iterative or continuative meaning in the clause where the Present Perfect is the main verb, as in

- (7) E: I *have worked* a lot lately
P: Eu *tenho trabalhado* muito ultimamente

However, when the Present Perfect and other elements in the clause carry the nuance of a single event meaning, there is no possibility of translating the Present Perfect as a Compound Present in Portuguese:

(8) E: I *have bought* a car

P: * Eu *tenho comprado* um carro

Instead, the Simple Past must be used in Portuguese:

P: Eu *comprei* um carro

The use of adverbs such as, eg., *for several years* can give to sentences with the Present Perfect an iterative/habitual meaning:

(9) E: He *has driven* a taxi for several years

P: Ele *tem dirigido* um taxi há vários anos

Portuguese, in this aspect, may be seen as having taken a more conservative pathway, if contrasted to other Romance languages. French and Spanish, for example, have extended the uses of the compound form, so as to have them even for the single event meaning. As seen above, this is not possible in Portuguese.

Still in our quest for a good presentation of materials for prospective translators, we would want students to become acquainted with a description of meanings associated with verb tenses and with a contrastive analysis of the type outlined above. This, for them, would be step two.

3.2 The Target Language: Syntactic Patterns in Portuguese

To go on with our study, it is now the time for us to look into the translations of the two texts I mentioned in the beginning: *General Urology* and *Treatment of Shock*, published in Portuguese as *Urologia Geral* and *Tratamento de Choque*, respectively. They are examples of a good job done by non-professional translators and, as such, may be models for others hoping to do a similar job. The three syntactic patterns discovered to occur with the Present Perfect in the rhetorical function of reporting past literature will now be seen both in the English original and in their Portuguese translations. As for Pattern I (see 2.1), which typically shows up as having the single event meaning, the choice of tense in the translation does not present any major problems:

E: Subject	HAVE	observed shown described indicated , , ,	(that)
P: Subject	observou mostrou descreveu indicou , , ,		(que)

For the texts examined, the English Present Perfect has been translated mostly as Portuguese Simple Past:

(10) E: 'Gant and others *have described* the concentration...'

P: 'Gant e outros *descreveram* a concentração...'

3.3 Discourse and Pragmatic Factors

In some cases, the presence of discourse and pragmatic factors can modify the picture outlined above. Thus, the presence of a verb in the Simple Present in the sentence immediately preceding the Present Perfect to be translated seems to allow for this Present Perfect to be translated as Portuguese

Simple Present, as in

(11) E: 'Cartilage defects in a point *invite* intra-articular adhesions. Salter and associates *have shown* that continuous motions...'

P: 'Defeitos de cartilagem em um certo ponto *propiciam* o aparecimento de adesões intra-articulares. Salter e cols *mostram* que movimentos continuos...'

(It is interesting to notice that one could have used the Simple Present instead of the Present Perfect in the second sentence.) The choice between Portuguese Simple Present or Simple Past in this context is then a question of personal style.

Some sentences in Pattern I will allow only a semantic interpretation of the single event type and, consequently, no Portuguese Compound Present can be used in the translation, as in the example:

(12) E: 'Bright and associates (1971) *have noted* this in rats'

P: 'Bright e cols *notaram* isto em ratos'

In this example, pragmatic reasons (the fact that Bright and associates have published their report at one time, in a single event) make it impossible for an iterative interpretation to be given to the English Present Perfect. Thus, in the Portuguese translation, the Compound Present (*tem notado*) is not allowed.

Considerations such as the ones we have been making exemplify step three: the presentation of the possibilities for the translation of a specific instance of Present Perfect and the determination of which one is the best, based on linguistic factors (eg, the presence of adverbs) or on pragmatic factors (as the one seen above).

The same procedures will be valid for Patterns II and III. As for Pattern II, the following configuration was obtained (see examples below):

E: Subject HAVE BEEN $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{reported} \\ \text{demonstrated} \\ \text{shown} \end{array} \right\}$
 P: (Subject) $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{tem sido} \\ \text{foi} \end{array} \right\}$ $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{relatado} \\ \text{demonstrado} \\ \text{apresentado} \end{array} \right\}$ (subject)

(Subject either in first or in end position)

tem-se $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{relatado} \\ \text{demonstrado} \\ \text{apresentado} \end{array} \right\}$ Object

What was previously said about tense choice also applies here. Translator's use of Portuguese Simple Past Passive (as in *foi relatado* or of Compound Present Passive (as in *tem sido relatado*) will depend on whether he or she wants to give an iterative/continuative interpretation to the sentence or not, always depending on the presence of adverbs in the discourse or on pragmatic reasons.

3.4 Word Order

The relevance of word order is to be noticed in Pattern II, as the Subject in Portuguese can come either in initial or in end position. This is so when the agent in the passive voice is not explicit (most cases fall under this category). However, when the agent is explicit, subject-verb word order is maintained, as in

(13) E: This phenomenon *has been discussed* by Moose (1971)
 P: Este fenômeno *foi discutido* por Moose (1971)

(Agent explicitness does not occur in the two sources I examined).

In my data, there was a tendency for subjects to come postposed in Pattern II sentences (only 2 exceptions in 28 instances). Further studies are necessary for us to verify if this reflects a stylistic preference of translators or if it corresponds to a preferred word order in Portuguese for sentences like the ones we have been talking about. Examples:

(14) E: A few deaths from gas embolism
 S
have been reported ...
 V

P: *Foram relatadas* algumas mortes, cau-
 V S
sadas por embolia gasosa...

(15) E: The association of papillary necrosis and cirrhosis *has been cited*
 V

P: *Tem sido mencionada* a associação da
 V S
necrose papilar com a cirrose

English Passive Voice sentences can also be translated into Portuguese by *se* (for indeterminacy of subject) and active voice constructions (according to Luft (1976, p. 133), sentences with *se* of this type are active, *se* is analysed as subject):³

(16) E: Every type of 'fascinoma'
 S
has been associated with fractures
 V

P: *Tem-se associado* todo tipo de 'fascino-
 (V) S (V) O
mas com fraturas

(In this example, subject *se* is surrounded by auxiliary and past participle of main verb. The verb is followed by O (Object)).

As for Pattern III, we notice:

E: it HAS BEEN $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{suggested} \\ \text{shown} \\ \text{documented} \end{array} \right\}$ Subject

$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{tem sido} \\ \text{foi} \end{array} \right\}$ $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{sugerido} \\ \text{demonstrado} \\ \text{documentado} \end{array} \right\}$ Subject

P: $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{sugeriu-} \\ \text{documentou-} \\ \text{demonstrou-} \end{array} \right\}$ se } Object

Previously seen observations about tense choice and word order also apply here.

(17) E: It *has been shown* that fibrogen is
 V S
 produced:

P: *Demonstrou-se* que o fibrogênio é
 V S O
 produzido...

(18) E: It *has been well documented* that low
 (V) (V) S
 cardiac output...

P: *Foi bem documentado* que o débito
 (V) (V) S
 cardíaco baixo...

For our students, this will be step four: the presentation of possible differences of word order

in the two languages and of the optional use of *se* and active voice structure in Portuguese.

4. CONCLUSION

In a way, the study presented here is programmatic. Much has to be done so that we may be able to facilitate students' understanding of the linguistic issues at stake in the translation of the Present Perfect. As a tentative approach, four steps have been proposed in composing a pedagogic micro-unit for teaching prospective translators:

1. Presentation, through the use of examples, of three syntactic patterns in which the Present

Perfect used to report past literature has shown up in data examined in the present study.

2. Presentation of the basic semantics of the Present Perfect and, when relevant to the rhetorical function in question, of an English-Portuguese contrastive analysis.

3. Presentation of some optional ways of translating the Present Perfect and of some obligatory ways of doing so, based on linguistic and pragmatic factors.

4. Presentation of differences of word order in English and Portuguese and of comments or preferred word order in Portuguese.

NOTES

- 1 Oster does not concern herself with syntactic patterns (which I, nevertheless, extracted from her data). I only used her article as a starting point for my study.
- 2 Discussion of the basic meaning of the Present Perfect has attracted much attention over the years. McCoard (1978) is usually cited as the most successful reviewer of the literature about the Perfect in English. For pedagogical purposes, the analysis by Dubois will be enough, at this point.
- 3 More sophisticated linguistic analysis of *se* has been attempted but there is still no consensus about what a good description should say about this particle. For our purposes, Luft's hypothesis is a good starting point.

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