

Syntactic Change through Translation: a Corpus-Based Approach to Language Change

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Translation and language change

- “Translation Universals” (Baker 1996, Laviosa 1998)
- “Law of Interference”: ‘In translation, phenomena pertaining to the make-up of the source text tend to be transferred to the target text.’ (Toury 1995)
- Quantitative norm innovations (Koller 1998)

Hypotaxis & Parataxis in German

“Although I had never seen him before, I could tell it was him”

Hypotactic Translation:

S

O

V

V

S

Obwohl ich ihn nie gesehen hatte, wusste ich, dass er es war.

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=> SXV - VSX

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Hypotactic Translation:

Obwohl **S** **O** **V** **V**
S
Obwohl **ich** **ihn** nie gesehen hatte, wusste **ich**, dass er es war.

=> SXV - VSX

Paratactic Translation

S **V** **O** **S** **V**
Ich hatte **ihn** nie gesehen, *doch* **ich** wusste, dass er es war

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“Although I had never seen him before, I could tell it was him”

Hypotactic Translation:

S O V V

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Obwohl ich ihn nie gesehen hatte, wusste *ich*, dass er es war.
=> SXV - VSX

Paratactic Translation

S V O S V

Ich hatte *ihn* nie gesehen, *doch ich* wusste, dass er es war

Model of language change

- Translation is language contact
 - Not centred on internal factors

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- Translation does not cause change
 - Non-causal

The Theory of Utterance Selection

- Croft (2000)
- Language use is 'replication'
- 'differential replication' \neq 'altered replication'
- Innovation affected by language-inherent factors, propagation predominantly social
- Propagation occurs through social acceptance, not by causal mechanisms

Influence through translation

Montgomery (2000): Influence of Greek on Latin (2nd and 1st century BCE)

“Our earlier orators thought highly of translation from Greek to Latin (...) There is much art in Greek authors’ eloquence, so that translating them gives us license to use the best words we can find, since anything we might use is naturally our own.”

Influence through translation

Darwin Correspondence Project Database

Letter 224, dated 28 Oct 1833

www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-224/

“I thought in the first part (of this last journal) that you had, probably from reading so much of Humboldt, got his phraseology & occasionly [sic] made use of the kind of flowery French expressions which he uses, instead of your own simple straight forward & far more agreeable style.”

Question

- How can we investigate whether translation has an effect on the preference of syntactic patterns?

Research Method

- Combine corpus linguistics and translation studies
- Diachronic translation corpora

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- Two-step corpus study
 1. Diachronic comparison of translation choices

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- Two-step corpus study
 1. Diachronic comparison of translation choices
 2. Compare findings with non-translated German texts

Previous studies

- *Covert Translation* project since 2006
- Genre: Popular Science
- Corpus: 1978-1982 and 1999-2002
- 300,000 words in total

Baumgarten, N. (2008) 'Writer construction in English and German popularized academic discourse: The uses of *we* and *wir*'. *Multilingua*, 27 (4), 409-38

Becher, V. (2011) 'Von der Hypotaxe zur Parataxe: Ein Wandel im Ausdruck von Konzessivität in neueren populärwissenschaftlichen Texten'. In Breindl et al: Satzverknüpfungen. Berlin: de Gruyter

Previous studies

- Musacchio 2005
- Genre: Economics Articles (*The Economist, La Stampa, Economy; Corriere della Sera, Sole 24*)
- Corpus: 2001-03 (synchronic)
- 70 articles (words not given)

Musacchio (2005) The Influence of English on Italian: The Case of Translations of Economics Articles. In Anderman & Rogers, *In and Out of English*.

From Hypotaxis to Parataxis

- Genre: business & economics essays
- Source: *Harvard Business Review* and *Harvard Business Manager*
- Objects: Concessive conjunctions, eg *although*; causal conjunctions, eg *because*

From Hypotaxis to Parataxis

	1982-3	2008
Translation Corpus	500,000 words	500,000 words
Comparable Corpus	200,000 words	200,000 words

My study

Hypothesis to be tested:

“In contexts where the English source text allows a choice between parataxis and hypotaxis for the German translations, translators choose paratactic constructions more frequently now than they did a few decades ago.”

Conclusion

- There is tentative evidence that translation may contribute to syntactic change
- This change manifests itself in the shift of preferences
- More research is needed on other languages and genres, eg newspaper articles, non-fiction books and novels

**Thank you for your
attention!**

Questions or Challenges?