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RESEARCH SEMINAR IN TRANSLATING FROM AGGLUTINATIVE LANGUAGES: CHALLENGES, EXPERIENCES, CONCLUSIONS

The paper deals with the process of forming teaching, and self-assessing an experimental Research Seminar that provided the students with the experience of translating from the non-Indo-European languages (Hungarian, Turkish, Finnish, and Basque) into the Indo-European languages (English and Croatian). The paper presents examples of the translation process using the analytic and comparative methods.

Keywords: teaching translation, non-Indo-European languages, agglutinative languages, translation process, translation analysis, equivalence

Članak opisuje proces stvaranja, predavanja i samoevaluacije eksperimentalnog istraživačkog seminara koji studentima pruža iskustvo prevođenja s neindoeuropskih jezika (mađarski, turski, finski i baskijski) na indoeuropske jezike (engleski i hrvatski). Članak nudi primjere prevoditeljskog procesa kroz analitičku i komparativnu metodu.

Кljučне riječi: nastava prevođenja, neindoeuropski jezici, aglutinativni jezici, proces prevođenja, analiza prijevoda, ekvivalentnost

1. Introduction

Last academic year, a task was bestowed upon me by the Division of Translation Studies of the University of Humanities and Social Studies in Rijeka, Croatia: to create an additional elective course on translation for the graduate students of the second year. Considering that the aforementioned division have already offered a large scope of theoretical, practical, and research subjects and seminars to the students, this task proved to be quite challenging. Therefore, I decided to step into the zone of what might be considered less usual: I contrived a 'Research Seminar on Translation of Agglutinative Languages to English and Croatian'. The following article is an account on the creation of the Research Seminar, the teaching process (with translation examples), and its immediate results.

1.1. Aims and goals

The premise behind the idea was quite simple – during the period of years I spent teaching at the Division of Translation Studies, I noticed that the students often struggled with transposing English syntax into Croatian, and vice versa, not to mention the problems with semantics, punctuation, and most significantly, culture-specific issues. Students often complained about these difficulties of the translation trade, and wrote lengthy seminar papers and theses on the matter. Sometimes I would suggest, semi-seriously, that the translation outside of the Indo-European linguistic family would be painfully eye-opening for them. Considering that the translation equivalence, still regarded one of the key terms in translation theory (Xiabin 2005), between the languages from different linguistic families is significantly lower, such translation practice would inevitably widen the students' perception of translation as such. This was the premise that guided me in the creation of the research seminar, and the aim of the seminar was to convey to the students how really challenging it is to translate between the languages from different linguistic families. By reaching that aim, hopefully, the students would significantly widen their idea of the translation process in general. In other words, once faced with the difficulty of translation between different linguistic families (arguably being the most complex translation process), the students were supposed to gain wider knowledge and higher confidence in translation between languages from the same linguistic family.

1.2. The choice of languages and texts

Once the goals of the seminar had been determined, the next logical step was to choose the linguistic families other than the Indo-European one, and

to choose which languages from these families would be considered. Luckily enough, I am a speaker of the Hungarian language, and I am acquainted with the translation from and to Hungarian language. In the Finno-Ugric language family, together with the Hungarian, there is also the Finnish language, and that is why I decided to consider texts in Finnish as well. Hungarian and Finnish languages are both agglutinative, and that was the reason why I decided to consider the Turkish language as well, Turkish being the main representative of the Turkic language family. Finally, I decided to consider texts in European linguistic isolate, the Basque language. The fact that Hungarian, Finnish, Turkish, and Basque all happen to be agglutinative languages (Škiljan 1980: 160), although to a slightly different degree, determined the name of the research seminar.

After determining the languages, it was necessary to consider the possible sources of translation source texts. Naturally, these texts had to be grammatically and syntactically approachable, while still providing a needed insight into the inner structure of agglutinative languages. In the case of the Hungarian language, I opted for the Hungarian weekly women's magazine *Nők Lapja (Women's Magazine)*, which offered an abundance of easily consumable texts in basic Hungarian, but also contained all the Hungarian agglutinative forms and often culture-specific syntactic and semantic features. Later during the course, I was joined by the lector for the Hungarian language at the University of Rijeka, Eszter Tamaskó, who provided us with a set of Hungarian source texts, most significantly aphorisms and short literary texts, which proved extremely useful for analyzing the translation process. As far as the Finnish, Turkish, and Basque languages are concerned, I used online language course pages, such as [Lingua.com](https://lingua.com)¹, which provide simple texts for beginner learners. These texts were semantically the same but available in different languages, which made the comparative approach of our translation analyses easier. Finally, we were joined by a Turkish ERASMUS student, Başak Altın of the Hacettepe University in Ankara, who was kind enough to provide us with her own samples of simple texts in Turkish, and their translations.

1.3. Problems and approaches

The main problem of the planned course was, quite obviously, language proficiency. I can only speak the Hungarian language, while the students either studied two semesters of basic Hungarian with professor Tamaskó, or they had no knowledge of Hungarian whatsoever. The students and I also had no knowledge of the Finnish, Basque and Turkish languages (except for colleague Altın, whose mother tongue is Turkish). This fact led to a significant structural problem: How to explain agglutinative systems of any language, let alone four

1 <https://lingua.com>

languages, in one teaching semester? And that, of course, cast some doubt on whether this Research Seminar would manage to reach its aims and goal at all.

A carefully constructed approach was needed. During the first class, I informed the students that this semester 'we would be translating from languages we do not speak'. I then pledged the students to actively contribute to this experimental seminar so that we would mutually construct a teaching process that could be used by and improved upon with and by future students.

Furthermore, taking into consideration that a few students had some basic insight into the Hungarian language, that I could speak and translate that language, and that we could be helped in the process by professor Tamaskó, I decided to put emphasis on the Hungarian language, while other languages were used mostly for reference.

I emphasised to the students that we would not be in position to explore and learn the entire agglutinative systems of the languages considered, but we would rather focus on the most important grammatical suffixes and adjacent syntactic issues, and cultural-specific features of both agglutinative semantics and grammar, while other, perhaps less prominent agglutinative suffixes we would resolve on the go. In other words, the focus of the research would not at all be on learning the languages but rather on analyzing agglutinative sentence structures and the ways of transposing them into sentences in the Indo-European languages while more-or-less retaining the original semantics.

In the introductory classes, we determined the meanings of the principal terms, such as agglutination, agglutinative languages, agglutinative suffixes, etc. We then proceeded with basic Hungarian suffixes denoting, what we could describe in the Indo-European linguistics as plural forms, accusative case forms, spatial and temporal interrelations (with the direction determined and without), possessive forms, instrumental case forms, locative case forms, forms determining the lack of some feature, forms determining causality, etc. Note that all these forms are explained by different nomenclatures in the Hungarian linguistics (and generally linguistics of agglutinative languages), but since that was not in the focus of the subject, it was omitted from our considerations². We also omitted deeper research into the twofold or 'double' (Marcantonio 1985: 267) conjugation of Hungarian verbs (different suffixation with the verbs with and without a sentence object³) because that complex grammatical system would be time consuming and impossible to deal with within one teaching semester. We, hence, put our entire focus on basic

2 For instance, the Hungarian language makes the difference between the Illative (case determining a position with the direction of movement suggested; -ba/-be) and Inessive (case determining a position without the direction of movement; -ban/-ben), and it also consists of grammatical cases such as Elative, Allative, Adessive, Ablative, Sublative, Suppressive, Delative, Terminative, and so on.

3 In Hungarian known as *alanyi* (indefinite; objectless) and *tárgyas* (definite; with object) conjugation.

grammatical, syntactical and cultural analyses of simple Hungarian sentences and their translation into Croatian and English.

After the first sample text we had translated from Hungarian, the students were startled. One of the illustrative comments in the classrooms was: 'this is not translation; this is war'. And indeed, the students right away noticed that the translation from an agglutinative language requires an extremely deep engagement of the translator in order to correctly interpret the meaning of agglutinative sentences, to resolve the syntactic jigsaw of word radices and agglutinative suffixes, and to deal with cultural frames of/for agglutinative grammar⁴. The last can again be brought into relation with what Newmark calls situational equivalence: "synonymy, paraphrase and grammatical variation all of which might do the job in a given situation, but would be inaccurate" (Newmark 1988: 198). In translating from, for example, the Hungarian language into English or Croatian, the situational equivalence or the lack of it is often of crucial importance.

We then proceeded with translating the same and similar texts into and from Turkish and Finnish, and, finally, Basque. Our approach to the translation was threefold: analytic (we analyzed all the grammatical/syntactic/semantic features of the source texts), problematic/practical (we considered all the possible ways of transposing the meanings from source texts by means of the English and Croatian grammars), and comparative (we compared the semantics of source and the adjacent target texts between the agglutinative languages and Indo-European languages but also between different agglutinative languages as well).

During our research, we translated a corpus of short texts from agglutinative languages to the English and Croatian languages, but also other agglutinative languages (especially from Hungarian to Turkish). During the process, we made analytic notes which helped us understand this type of translation and the challenges that it poses upon translators.

2. Samples of research work

In the following passage, I will provide several examples of research work that are illustrative of the work the students executed, and the translation

4 By 'cultural frame' of and for the agglutinative grammar, I am referring to the fact that, much more often than in the Indo-European languages, sentences in agglutinative languages can often be grammatically entirely correct but culturally unacceptable. That means that, depending on a cultural situation, grammatical structures can slightly or significantly differ from their situationally neutral forms. This poses quite a challenge for translation, especially from an Indo-European to an agglutinative language. If translated situationally incorrectly (word-to-word, or rather, meaning-to-meaning) but with correct grammatical devices, such sentences are perceived by the native speakers of the agglutinative languages as 'peculiarly correct but somehow unacceptable'.

experience they gained. The following English and Croatian sentences are from one of the initial translations we did in class:

I see five hamsters in front of the school. The hamsters are in the cage.

Vidim pet hrčaka ispred škole. Hrčci su u kavezu.

We translated that into Hungarian as follows:

*Látom öt hörcsögöt iskolánál. A hörcsögök ketre**ben** vannak.*

In a word-to-word translation, this Hungarian sentence would read like this:

* I see five hamster+Accusative school+'next too'. The hamsters cage+'in something' are.

We here noted the variations of basic Hungarian agglutinative suffixes: 1. – (ö)t for the accusative, which is added to the singular form of the word, unlike in Indo-European languages. This is important because in the Hungarian language, if the number referring to a noun is denoted in the sentence, the noun ‘semantically excludes referents of any numerosity’ (Yatsushiro 2023), 2. - nál denoting ‘next to something’, where the final vowel -a in iskola (school) is prolonged into -á-; all this leads to conclusion that the translation of the word *iskolánál* is ‘in front of/next to the school’. While ‘next to the school’ sounds somehow unusual in English when referring to a small object like a cage, ‘in front of the school’ is perhaps more acceptable (although the Hungarian language has a separate agglutinative suffix denoting ‘in front of’), 3. -ben for a position which does not imply movement (to be in a cage is *ketre**ben***, while to go into the cage would be *menni ketre**be***). Furthermore, the Hungarian verb declension suffix for the first person singular in present -om is observable in *látom* (I see), and –(ö)k for the plural of nouns (*hörcsögök* – hamsters; here plural is needed because there is no determining number in the sentence). Finally, in the second sentence, we can observe the tendency in the Hungarian language to place auxiliary and other verbs at the end of the sentence, which is a syntactic issue (Kiss 2021: 252).

We also translated these two sentences into Turkish in the following way:

Okulun önünde beş hamster görüyorum. Hamsterlar kafesin içinde.

In a word-to-word translation, this Turkish sentence would read:

*School+'determines that the next word refers to school' in front five hamster I see. Hamsters cage+'determines that the next word refers to cage' inside.

Here we can note striking differences but also some similarities between the Turkish and Hungarian grammatical agglutination. Firstly, the Turkish language often features ‘double markers’ in expressing spatial relationships; the

two examples being 'okul + UN' and then 'önünde' (*in front*; a full preposition, rather than just suffix), and kafes + IN (-un and -in being different versions of the same suffix due to vowel harmony that, in a very similar way, exists in Hungarian as well) and then içinde (preposition *inside*). There is also the Turkish verb declension suffix for the first person singular in present -(üyor) um is observable in *görüyorum*, and -lar for the plural of nouns (hamsterlar – hamsters). Just as numerous Non-Indo-European languages, but also some Indo-European languages, the Turkish language does not require the verb 'to be' in the second sentence, where the existence of the object (hamsters) is clearly denoted by the nouns and the preposition.

While translating these simple sentences from Hungarian and Turkish, the students had to connect all the semantic markers in the sentences and radically rearrange them syntactically to produce sentences valid in the English and Croatian languages. This prepared them for much more complex sentences we dealt with later during the course.

In a more comparative approach, we translated from Finnish (via English) into Hungarian and Turkish. Here I will provide only the first two sentences of the source texts. The Finnish source text was as follows:

Minun nimeni on Ella ja olen kahdeksantoista vuotias. Käyn lukion toista vuotta Turussa, mutta olen kotoisin Oulusta.

In a word-to-word translation, this Finnish sentence would read (with semantic clusters grouped in parentheses):

*My [name+'mine'] is Ella and I eighteen [year+'reference to age']. I am going high [school +'of'] [repeated + 'in' year +'refers to school'] [Turku + 'in'], but am [native + 'of'] [Oulu + 'from'].

From this we can, after significant translating effort, deduct the following:

My name is Ella and I am eighteen years old. I am attending (instead of 'going') the second year in high school in Turku, but I am originally from Oulu.

In the Finnish sentence, we can observe the following agglutinative suffixes: 1. -ni, depicting the meaning of 'belonging to me' (interestingly, here the possessivity is double-marked: by the pronoun 'my' and by the suffix), 2. -ias, depicting 'belonging to a certain category', here it is the category of age (interestingly, this suffix partially coincides with a similar suffix in Hungarian -as/-os/-es), 3. -n, determines that the next word refers to school (quite similar to Turkish suffixation in the previous example), 4. -ta, basically determining that something comes from somewhere (in the meaning 'from') 5. -sa, positioning something or someone (in the meaning 'in'). In this sentence, we can also observe an interesting cultural feature of the Finnish semantics: the word 'second' is derived from the root word meaning 'repeated'. Furthermore,

suffixation can alternate the root of a word, as in the example of the city name Turku – in Turku: Turussa (something that can pose a challenge to translators). Verbs in Finnish do not tend to appear at the end of the sentence, as a matter of fact, the syntactic positioning of verbs is quite similar to the Croatian language.

We translated this Finnish sentence into Hungarian in this manner:

A nevem Ella és tizennyolc éves vagyok. Másodikos vagyok a közép iskolában Turkúban de Oului vagyok.

In a word-to-word translation, this Hungarian sentence would read (with semantic clusters grouped in parentheses):

*[Name + ‘mine’] Ella and eighteen [year+‘reference to age’] I am. [Second+ ‘category of being in the second year’] I am [high school + ‘in’] [Turku + ‘in’] but [Oului + ‘belonging there’] I am.

In this sentence we can observe the following forms of the Hungarian suffixes: 1. -em, depicting possessive, 2. -es/os, a suffix in declension of numbers very typical of Hungarian; this suffix basically means ‘someone or something belonging to that age or numeration’ (as already mentioned, it is similar to Finnish -ias), 3. -ban, depicting positioning without direction (‘to be in’), and 4. -i, depicting ‘origin and belonging’. It is interesting to note here that the word ‘másodikos’ represents a culture-specific way of expressing belonging to a certain temporal category (year in the school, generation, etc.). Words ‘to be’ are consistently placed at the end of the sentences.

Finally, we translated the Finnish sentence into Turkish as follows:

Adım Ella ve on sekiz yaşındayım. Turku’da lise ikinci sınıftayım ama Oulu’luyum.

In a word-to-word translation, this Turkish sentence would read (with semantic clusters grouped in parentheses):

*[Name + ‘mine’] Ella and ten eight [age + ‘years + mine’]. [Turku + ‘in’] high school second [year + generation + mine’] but [Oulu + ‘origin mine’].

In this sentence we can observe the following forms of the Turkish suffixes: 1. -ım, depicting possessive agreement (quite similar to the Hungarian suffix with the same meaning), 2. -yim, depicting something belonging to or describing someone (which echoes the agglutinative structure both in Hungarian and Finnish), and, 3. -da, depicting position; ‘in’. It is interesting that the semantic marker for origin seems to be culturally specific, as it does not use a suffix referring to the meaning ‘from’, but rather uses a suffix referring to ‘my belonging’ (somewhat similar to Hungarian suffix -i).

These exemplary sentences illustrate that even simple sentences in agglutinative languages can pose quite a challenge to translators. Such translation requires close focus on the meanings of all the suffixes, and constant rearranging

of the syntax. It is interesting to note that all three agglutinative languages display certain structural and logical similarities, meaning that experience in translation of one of these languages can help in translation of others.

In order to inspect a translation of an entirely unrelated agglutinative language, we used a short Basque text. Below are the first two sentences from the source text:

Iberiar Penintsulan bizirik dirauen erromatarren aurreko hizkuntza bakarra da euskara. Gutxitze prozesu gogorra jasan du, etenik gabe lurraldeak eta hiztunak galduz.

In a word-to-word translation, this Basque sentence would read (with semantic clusters grouped in parentheses):

*Iberian [Peninsula-on] alive it lasts [of the Romans before] language only is Basque. Decrease [process + accusative] strong endured (it) has, constantly [without the territories and speakers losing].

It is clear that, just as in the Hungarian/Turkish/Finnish examples, the translation from the Basque language requires a similar approach: close focus on the meanings of all the suffixes, and constant rearranging of the syntax. After the translation, which is actually an intense rewriting process, this is an acceptable English translation of the Basque sentences:

Basque is the unique pre-Roman language that survives in the Iberian Peninsula. It has suffered a dire retreat and loss regarding its speakers and territory.

In conclusion, I would like to consider an example of an interesting challenge posed to translators by the lack of grammatical gender in the Hungarian language. The source text originates from the literary genre of aphorisms, and from the collection *Magyarmesék* by Aliz Mosonyi. The first sentence in one of the short texts reads:

Volt egyszer egy gazdag özvegy. Özvegyasszony vagy özvegyember? kérdezték a magyarok.

It is important to note that in Hungarian the word *özvegy* means 'any person who has lost their life partner', which leads to the conclusion that it can mean both a *widow* and a *widower*. While the Hungarian language does not recognize grammatical gender, information on gender can be provided by additional words, just like in these examples: *özvegy + asszony* (widowed person + lady) and *özvegy + ember* (widowed person + man). Hence, the word-to-word translation of the Hungarian sentence would sound like this (with semantic clusters grouped in parentheses):

*There was once one rich widowed. [Widowed + lady] or [widowed + man]? asked the Hungarians.

A possible English translation of the sentence would be:

Once upon a time, a rich person lost their pair. Was it a widow or a widower? asked the Hungarians.

Here we can observe that the phraseology (fixed forms like Hungarian *volt egyszer* that translates as *once upon a time*) in the translation to English had to be changed, as well as the rest of the grammatical structure of the first language. However, it is even more problematic to translate this sentence into Croatian. If we translate it a word-to-word, it will read like this:

Bio jednom netko bogat kome je umro par. Je li udovica ili udovac? – pitaše Mađari.

The translation is semantically ambiguous (because the word *bio* strongly suggests a male person), and the stylistics of the sentence does not express in full a possible quality of the Croatian literary genre. Thus, interventions into the translation were needed to improve the sentence semantically and stylistically. In the end, we came up with the following translation:

Izgubi netko bogat životonoga para. Udovac ili udovica? – pitaše Mađari.

The sheer scale of the needed intervention into the source text translation shows that even the basic grammatical differences in simple sentences can pose serious challenges in translation between different linguistic families, and that such translation often requires what Lyons refers to as linguistic virtuosity (Lyons 1995: 332).

3. Results and observations

The students involved in the project were unanimous in their observation that the agglutinative suffixes, especially the ones combined from more semantic elements, often posed almost unsolvable tasks in understanding the semantic relations between words in a sentence. Translation of agglutinative languages compelled them to redefine the way how they see grammar. Furthermore, they realized that such translation did not presume just a semantic definition of words in the source language and the identification of their semantic pairs in the target language, followed by the often typified redistribution of syntactic units in the target language, and, finally, resolving culturally specific and phraseological issue between languages, but it also preconditioned a significant shift in translation practice in order to bridge the gaps between radically different ways of grammatical thinking. In that sense, translation between different linguistic families can be seen as the most challenging form of translation.

At the end of the semester, I asked the students to explain in their own words what they, as future translators, learned and gained from this Research Seminar, and here are some of their answers:

I was surprised that Hungarian, unlike the languages it is surrounded by, is really context depended; the meaning of words and the formation of the words depends heavily on the situation the speaker/writer finds themselves in. This is not only a difference in language but also in culture, as well as in the way of thinking and perceiving the world. The way this course was implemented helped me to better my understanding of the various languages and their structures, which in turn helped me to evolve as a translator in quite an unexpected direction.

(Nevio Reiter)

My expectations from the new course were fairly high. I was hoping to get acquainted with the language structure of agglutinative languages and get a feel for how difficult it is to translate them into Croatian or English. I believe that the course has not only managed to fulfill my expectations, but also to go above and beyond when it comes to the introduction of these languages to people that have not had the opportunity to learn them, let alone translate them. Native language speakers of the Hungarian and Turkish language gave us an opportunity to ask questions and to get their opinions and thoughts on how certain language structures vary between our languages. I am glad about my decision to attend this course because it made me realize just how difficult it is to translate outside the Indo-European language family and it provided me with a new appreciation for the translation process.

(Robert Sedlanić)

The Indo-European languages use prepositions, for example, to describe the notion of movement in one direction or the other, but the Finno-Ugric language group uses suffixes, and combining different suffixes with a different root vowel can be particularly difficult. Now that we have analyzed texts and translations from the Finno-Ugric and Turkic language families, we should never complain about the difficulties in translating the Indo-European languages.

(Tibor Friščić)

4. Conclusion

While translating sample texts of agglutinative languages, Hungarian, Turkish, Finnish, and Basque, students achieved two important goals: 1. They widened their overview of the translation process in general. The students got an insight into translation issues that they would otherwise never encounter translating just within one linguistic family, 2. They developed awareness that a 'more complex' form of translation exists, and in that way enhanced their self-assurance as translators.

Equally importantly, the students got a chance to significantly contribute to a creation of a new Research Seminar. Their work was crucial in making this in many ways risky endeavour work. Taking all this in account, I believe that the aims and goal of the research Seminar were achieved, hence providing the students with an important translation experience.

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ИСТРАЖИВАЧКИ СЕМИНАР ИЗ ПРЕВОЂЕЊА С АГЛУТИНАТИВНИХ ЈЕЗИКА: ИЗАЗОВИ, ИСКУСТВА, ЗАКЉУЧЦИ

Резиме

Овај чланак представља приказ експерименталног истраживачког семинара који је спроведен током зимског семестра академске 2023/2024. године на Катедри за транслатологију Филозофског факултета Свеучилишта у Ријеци, Хрватска. Истраживачки семинар се бавио превођењем примера из изворних текстова са неиндоевропских

и аглутинативних језика (мађарског, турског, финског и баскијског) како би студентима пружио додатни увид у процес превођења. Такво преводачко искуство, које би иначе остало непознато студентима, помогло им је да боље разумеју сложеност преводачког рада у пракси и повећало њихову самоувереност као преводаца.

Никола Тутек рођен је 1978. у Карловцу, Хрватска. Године 2003. дипломирао је хрватски и енглески језик и књижевност при Филозофском факултету Свеучилишта у у Ријеци, а 2005. положио државни испит за мађарски језик при институту „Балаша Балинт“ у Будимпешти. Године 2018. докторирао је на Свеучилишту у Грацу (Karl Franzens-Universität Graz) с дисертацијом о мултимодалности у канадским кратким причама. Од 2012. запослен на Филозофском факултету у Ријеци.

Nikola Tutek was born in 1978 in Croatia. In 2003, graduated with excellence at the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Studies, and obtained a MA diploma in English and Croatian Language and Literature. In 2005, obtained the State Exam for Hungarian language at the Balassi Bálint Institute in Budapest. Defended PhD Thesis on multimodality in Canadian Short Fiction at the Karl-Franzens University of Graz in 2018. From 2012 teaching at the University of Rijeka.