

ON WORDINESS IN WRITTEN PRODUCTION OF SLOVAK USERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract: Personal experience and anecdotal evidence have both shown that Slovak texts which are literally translated into English are appreciably longer in translation than in the original. In addition, Slovak writing conventions seem to tolerate greater levels of tautology and verbosity than most English language editors would accept; translators of Slovak into English comment on high levels of redundancy in source texts and on how much better they would be if they were carefully edited. The combination of these two factors often leads to English versions of Slovak texts which are overlong and repetitive. In this article I will look at examples of this and show how through more careful and critical translating of an original text, where focus is placed more on translating the ideas expressed than on all the words written, target texts can become more concise and readable and free of many of the redundancies that now undermine their quality.

Key words: academic, formal writing; translation; redundancy; repetition

Introduction

The importance of concision in academic texts and in formal writing of any kind should not be understated; there are few things for readers which are as distracting as needless redundancy and repetition and if an article is to be incisive and meaningful, it needs to be succinctly and lucidly written. Slovak texts which are literally translated into English are usually about ten per cent longer in translation than in the original, a fact which primarily results from the addition of English articles, pronouns, auxiliary verbs and other lexical items needed to reflect the full meaning of the original text. Unfortunately, however, many texts written in English by Slovaks, either written straight into English or translated from Slovak, are also marred by redundancies and unnecessary repetition, both of which undermine the quality of the final work. There are various reasons for this. One may be the effect of first language interference: there are many cases where the Slovak original expression (and literal English translation thereof) is wordier than the best English equivalent. A second reason may be stylistic: Slovak academic writing conventions arguably allow for a more verbose and repetitive writing style, in general, than English writing conventions allow and translators who adhere too much to the Slovak original text may transfer this verbosity to the target text. One last reason is more pragmatic and self-conscious: often an article or a dissertation has a minimum word count and writers who lack sufficient material inevitably find themselves recycling the same subject matter to reach it.

First Language Interference

Redundancies in Slovak texts translated into English (as well as in the English spoken by Slovaks) can often be attributed to first-language interference. Typical examples include such sentences as: *he painted his room yellow colour*; *she didn't know the way how to do it*; *they ate chicken meat for lunch*; *he translated the book into Slovak language*; *she was born in the year 1960*. Each of these is a literal translation of a Slovak sentence and in each case the words italicized are superfluous. Although of these five examples, only the first three are grammatically incorrect, the other two are stylistically undesirable and also best avoided for the sake of concision.

There are many such examples of this, some of which may even be grammatically and conceptually flawed in the original language but which still commonly occur in English as a result of L1 interference. These include such sentences as: *the twins are both very different* (can just one twin be different?); *he returned back after several years*; *they mutually influence one another* (the word ‘mutually’ adds nothing to the meaning of this statement and is tautological); the egregious but still occasionally spoken (if not written) ‘double comparative’: *it was much more longer/shorter/better etc. than I expected*. In academic writing we should always aim to be grammatically correct as well as to delete all words which do not add to the meaning of the sentence. When we translate, however, there is often a tendency not to do the latter: a) because we may be inclined to show undue respect to the author of the source text; and/or b) because we are guilty of translating texts too literally, often at the expense of correct grammar and a readable style; too literal a translation often leads to sentences in the target text which are clumsy and overwritten. The following examples of this are all taken from a first draft of a Bratislava City Museum guidebook which I recently analysed. Beneath each one is my own proposed alternative version:

...the features and characteristics of the fragments in the museum are pointing with high likelihood towards the notion that these are from a statue.

..the nature of the fragments in the museum clearly indicate that they are from a statue.

These are artefacts which belong among the treasures of our cultural heritage.

These artefacts are treasures of our cultural heritage.

The collection includes the facts which in a chronological order document several aspects of life in the city during the period of 1848-1945.

The collection chronicles several aspects of life in the city between 1848 and 1945.

During the course of various periods many different academic titles were awarded.

Over the years many different academic titles were awarded.

These examples illustrate the kind of redundancies which may occur in over-faithful translations from Slovak and reflect the need to find a balance between retaining the meaning of the original text and creating a new text which is both accurate and concise. Unlike the previous examples given higher up in which just one or two words resulting from a literal translation needed to be removed, these sentences needed to be reformulated in the target text to create sentences which are more English-sounding and concise. And as with the earlier examples, the influence of L1 interference in the unrevised translations is clear to see.

Stylistic Conventions and Minimum Word Counts

Frequent translators and proof-readers of Slovak/English texts will become familiar with many such recurrent examples of over-literal translation as those given above. The following examples also occurred in the same publication (again with my proposed alternative versions underneath):

After realization of building work was carried out...

After completion of building work...

From the 50s of the 19th century...

From the 1850s...

Of a total number of 270 coins, the museum obtained only 223 pieces.

Of a total (number) of 270 coins, the museum obtained only 223.

These examples typify the kind of stylistic errors which are made by Slovaks and show the need for careful editing. Translators should always consider the necessity of including each lexical item and decide whether it has an indispensable function in the sentence or is just

‘filling’ which results from L1 interference and an over-literal translation. Translators should also realize that what may be stylistically acceptable in Slovak need not be in English. I recently analysed a formal text about Ján Amos Komenský written for visitors of an exhibition. The text introduced his life and work and then in subsequent parts continued to refer to him by his full name, Ján Amos Komenský (Comenius) rather than just by his surname, which is the stylistic convention in English. The following, more extreme example of unnecessary repetition, is taken from a translation of a call for papers written by a magazine editor:

In tourism, those (research bases which determine research methods preferences and their focus) could include: conceptions of formation of recreation areas, conceptions of tourism functions, conceptions of creating recreation centers, conceptions of perception of recreation space, conceptions of recreation urbanization, conceptions of tourism conflict, conceptions of tourist guiding, conceptions of tourism product formation, conceptions of religious tourism, environmental conception, conception of alternative tourism, cartographic conceptions and GIS applications, conception of tourism management and many others.

Here the frequency of the word ‘conception’ together with the conflation of multiple Latin-based nouns creates an English text which is unacceptably wordy. As James Bednar says: “The best formal writing will be difficult to write but easy to read”. The repetitiveness of the sentence above, however, places undue demands on the reader and makes understanding very difficult. Had the writer started the sentence with the following,

In tourism, those could include conceptions of: formation of recreation areas; tourism functions; creating recreation centers etc.

he would have immediately reduced the text by twenty words and created a far more readable sentence. Often, however, the desire for brevity and readability do not seem to be uppermost in the minds of producers of many such texts. Instead the reader has the impression that writers are making little effort to limit the number of words they use, a tendency which may result from the translator being too faithful to the original text, from a certain kind of verbal exhibitionism in the writer or from the simple need of either writer or translator to fulfil a minimum word count.

In reference to these points, consider this further advice from Bednar:

Unfortunately, specifying minimum page requirements encourages redundancy, but please try to avoid that temptation. When two words will do, there is no need to use twenty. Whenever you finish a sentence or paragraph, read over it to see if any words or sentences can be eliminated -- often your point will get much stronger when you do so. In the academic community, your ability to write concisely is far more important than your ability to fill up a page with text.

Academic courses specify page minimums to ensure that you write an essay of the appropriate depth, not to test whether you can say the same thing a dozen different ways just to fill up space. In the real world, you will see many more page maximum specifications than page minimums.

If our aim is to write academic texts which will state their point clearly and incisively, we should always remember guidelines such as these. The following advice comes from another article about effective academic writing (Easterly III, Myers, Lutz, and Place) and reflects conventions in the English-speaking world:

Editing for conciseness is important to the readability of the paper. Are there words in the sentences that could be removed while retaining the integrity of the thought? Also, look for extraneous words like "quite," "definitely," "very," and "somewhat." Imagine each word costs a dollar. Where best to cut costs?

Although such advice may seem rudimentary, often in Slovakia (and almost certainly in many other countries, too) it seems that writers of academic articles, grant applications and various other formal texts are guided by the opposite instinct and set out to write as many words as they can, adding and repeating them and reiterating the same points over and over again in a bid to flesh out their texts as much as possible. And though there may be certain sociological and/or pragmatic reasons for this: “This is how we were taught to write during Socialism”; “the more we wrote and the longer and more sophisticated the words we used, the better the impression we created”; “I need to fill in the whole page of the application so that it looks good – if I don’t fill it all in, they’ll think I don’t have very much to say”; “It has to be at least ten pages long but I can’t think of anything else to write so I’m just repeating the same material“ etc., writers of such texts need to ask themselves whether the overall effect of their work is not being undermined by such an approach.

Conclusion

If the academic texts we write are to have a value greater than merely fulfilling our professional obligation to publish or solicit EU funds, then it is important that we are considerate to our readers and aim for greater concision and readability in our writing. As I have shown above, excessive wordiness in writing translated from Slovak into English or writing in English written by Slovaks may be a result of several different factors, some of which are understandable given the difficulties involved in writing in English and the demands placed on academics. It is of course extremely difficult if not impossible to write an article in a foreign language without any kind of redundancy whatsoever and this article is not intended as a criticism of Slovaks’ English language skills. What this article does aim to highlight, however, is the value of concision in formal writing and the need of the writer to consider the experience of the person reading the target text. We should, therefore, always edit our work carefully and delete words and sentences which add nothing to the meaning of the text. That way, by attempting to write as clearly and succinctly as we can, we show courtesy to our readers and greatly increase the chances of our ideas and observations being read with understanding and appreciation.

References

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