

Delicate Matters: Discretion in Language Editing and Translating

ABSTRACT

The article deals mainly with misunderstandings that may arise in translations which, although formally/grammatically correct, do not convey the desired meaning or effect. Working from the basis of authentic examples, the author provides guidelines as to how typical, recurrent errors may be avoided in specific language areas, including: word order and word choice, punctuation, sentence length, problematic structures (with an emphasis on negative forms), tone and register, meaning and ambiguity, metaphor - idiom and cliché, and the omnipresent source language influence.

KEY WORDS: *language editing, translating, errors, meaning*

IZVLEČEK

Občutljive zadeve: Previdnost pri lektoriranju in prevajanju

Članek obravnava pretežno napačno razumevanje, ki se pojavlja v prevodih, kadar le-ti ne izrazijo zelenega pomena ali učinka, čeprav so formalno oziroma slovnično pravilni. Avtor na osnovi izvirnih primerov predstavi smernice, kako se lahko izognemo tipičnim in ponavljajočim se napakam na posebnih jezikovnih področjih, ki zadevajo: besedni red in izbor besed, rabo ločil, dolžino povedi, težavne zgradbe (s poudakom na nikalnih oblikah), glasovni poudarek in jezikovno zvrst, pomen in dvoumnost, metafore oziroma idiome in klišeje ter vsepovsod novzoči vpliv izvirnega jezika.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: *lektoriranje, prevajanje, napake, pomen*

Increasingly often, I find myself checking through my speeches while travelling ... and generally shorten them, or else jot down a few ideas to add to the text. What hinders me, though, is that I'm not giving the presentations in my own language. My colleagues - German, French, English - have the great advantage of speaking in their mother tongue. Only rarely can I do that.¹

(Interview with Dr Dimitrij Rupel, Foreign Minister of the Republic of Slovenia.)

The disadvantage mentioned by Dr Rupel is, in a sense, the underlying theme of this article. That is: What are the difficulties faced by those who, because they speak what are politely referred to as "languages of lesser diffusion", have to conduct most of their affairs in a foreign language, often English?

¹ "Dan z dr. Dimitrijem Ruplom", an interview in *Nedelo*, 12 June 2005, (my translation)

In the examples presented, I have attempted to provide a synthesis of some of the most frequently occurring – often unintentional – misunderstandings that may arise in translation.

The selection is drawn mainly from formal correspondence and official documents which I have edited or translated over the period from 1990 to 2006. In most cases the source language (SL) is Slovene. Although the original texts are not confidential (since most have already been published), I have preferred, out of courtesy, not to specify the sources.

The examples focus mainly on formal language, particularly diplomatic and official correspondence², with an overall emphasis on meaning and ambiguity. For instance, what is understood by: *The Minister is supposed to arrive for the meeting in Bled on Thursday*. Is the Minister: expected to arrive / intending to arrive / going to arrive / hoping to arrive? Is he/she arriving on Thursday or does the meeting begin on Thursday – or both? Having seen the official programmes for several state visits (e.g. by presidents Bush, Clinton, Putin) I have become more alert to the correct wording of press releases. However, as a counterbalance to the formal register, I have also included a few examples from (possibly) less sensitive contexts, e.g. hotel notices: *Guests inadequately dressed, either with or without bathing costumes, are not admitted to the public rooms*.

For convenience, the examples below are grouped together according to types of potential error. Inevitably, they do overlap, and SL influence is pervasive throughout.

STYLE AND REGISTER – LEVELS OF FORMALITY

Mr. James Macpherson,

I received your foolish and impudent note. Whatever insult is offered me I will do my best to repel; and what I cannot do for myself, the law will do for me.

(Dr. Samuel Johnson to the translator of Ossian, with whom he was in dispute.)

The tone of Dr Johnson's letter is already signalled in the opening three words *I received your ...* The formality clashes intentionally with the informality of *foolish and impudent note*. The letter concludes: *You may print this if you will*.

In translated correspondence, by contrast, similar clashes may occur quite unintentionally. For instance:

- Your Excellency, I have received the invitation of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Poland to pay a visit to the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Poland, and I wish to thank you it most sincerely.

The opening words *I have received the invitation* seem to imply that a negative response is likely to follow, e.g.: ... owing to prior commitments I am, unfortunately, unable to accept. In such cases, it may be preferable to "put the good news first":

- I should like to thank you most sincerely for the invitation I have received from ... to pay a visit to ...

(Note: the word order is clearly influenced by the SL text, which begins: *pred časom sem prejel vabilo ministra za zdravstvo Republike Poljske...*, and ends: *za katero se iskreno zahvaljujem*. This is polite usage and does not sound as cold as the translation.)

A comparable example, in which the wrong expectations are raised by the opening words, would be:

- Dear Dr Martinez, It was with great interest that I read your letter inviting me to participate in the consultations in Strasbourg. Regrettably, I myself will not be able to take part in the consultations due to previously accepted obligations.

Hopes are aroused by the words *It was with great interest that I read ...*, only to be dashed by *regrettably, I myself will not be able to take part*. Suggested rewording:

- Dear Dr Martinez, Thank you very much for your letter of 12 February /the date needs to be mentioned/, inviting me to participate in the consultations ... I regret to inform you that, owing to prior commitments, I will not be able to attend.

In diplomatic correspondence – or the language of protocol – expressions of apology or regret need to be carefully worded. For safety's sake, the writer often reaches for the highest stops on the organ – the upper range of formality. This may lead to disharmony, as here:

- (Our president extends to you his most sincere thanks for your invitation to meet you at the time of the meeting of the UN General Assembly and for your invitation to a luncheon.) I regret to inform you that our President will not take part in the General Assembly meeting, and consequently, cannot honour your invitation.

Although this letter is intended to be politely cordial (first sentence), it comes across as being formally cool. This impression is created by three expressions: 1) *I regret to inform you that ...*, which is inevitably associated with "bad news" (job applications, bank statements, rejection slips, etc.), 2) *our president will not take part ...*, which (inadvertently) gives impression that the President has deliberately decided *not* to take part. 3) *... and consequently, cannot honour*

your invitation. The word *consequently* has legalistic or academic undertones which add to the chill factor.

Suggested rewording (second sentence):

- The president greatly regrets that, owing to prior commitments, he is unable to take up your kind invitation.

As George Orwell rightly says: "What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about".

The urge to be polite often leads to an awkward choice of words, as here:

Dear Mr Snyder, Our Vice-President ... has recently returned home with great impressions of your esteemed institution. He gave us an account of the discussions held with authorized members of your Managing Board that he considered quite successful.

The three distracting words are: 1) *esteemed* – this sounds like Austro-Hungarian flattery, which does not ring quite true in English. Either omit the word, or replace it with a less obtrusive adjective, e.g. *excellent/renowned*. 2) *authorized members* – surely all members of the Board are authorized? 3) *quite successful* – unfortunately, *quite* has several meanings, ranging from *very* to *relatively/fairly*.

Reword, as below:

- Our Vice-President has recently returned home, bringing with him (highly) favourable impressions of your (excellent) institution. He reports that the discussions held with your Managing Board were most successful.

Even in less formal contexts, formal expressions may slip in:

- We invite you kindly to play mini-golf situated in the pleasant environment of motel Jezero.

The word *kindly* – because of its seeming associations with *kind* and *kindness* – is often mistakenly used in translation as a polite, even warm request. More frequently, however, it is a disguised imperative, as in: (*would you*) *kindly* return to your seats /refrain from using mobile phones/ forward receipts for your travel expenses, etc. The example above could be less formally worded as:

- You are *welcome/invited* to play mini-golf in the attractive surroundings of Motel Jezero.

In the next example, *kindly* is correctly used, yet the sentence could be better balanced:

- You are *kindly requested* to inform the reception desk at 11 a.m. about your departure, as well as to empty your room until noon.

Rewording:

- Please announce your departure (to the Reception desk) by 11.00 and vacate your room by 12.00 /or, by noon / at latest.

In correspondence, constructions with *Please (could you)* are often preferable to those beginning with *Kindly ...* Otherwise, *kindly* can be omitted:

- Hoping to hear from you next week, we wish you all the best and *kindly ask you to* inform us about your experience in the area of natural disasters, with a special emphasis on landslides.

Yours sincerely,

When ending a letter, it is advisable to keep practical details separate from the closing greetings. Here, the “best wishes” are awkwardly mixed in with “natural disasters”. Hence the suggested change in wording:

- We would be glad to learn about your experience in the area of natural disasters, with special emphasis on landslides.

I look forward to hearing from you next week.

With best wishes, (...) ²

MEANING AND AMBIGUITY

The Romans produced large quantities of wine and archaeologists estimate that a single estate in central Italy produced over one million litres of wine annually.
(government publicity brochure)

We should have a little difficulty in understanding this sentence, even though – on first reading – it suggests that: The Romans produced *large quantities of wine and archaeologists*. A helpful comma after *wine* would have indicated that the line of thought is moving on in a different direction – *archaeologists estimate that ...* As Lynne Truss has noted: “On the page, punctuation performs its grammatical function, but in the mind of the reader it does more than that. It tells the reader how to hum the tune.” ³

After sifting through the material I have gathered over the years, I notice that – if we set aside purely grammatical errors – meaning is most often blurred or distorted by: faulty *punctuation*, inappropriate *word order* or *choice of words*, defective *structures* (especially passive/active and negative forms) and, of course, *direct source language influence*.

Below are some typical examples.

²For a full chapter on Official Correspondence see McConnell - Duff, Alan, 2000, *Into English*, DZS, Ljubljana

³Truss, Lynne, 2003, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, Profile Books Ltd, London

Punctuation

Missing comma:

- Dear Dr Hartmann, It was a great pleasure and honour to have the chance of working with you and the moments spent in your company are memorable to me.

In order to avoid running together the words ... *the chance of working with you and the moments* ..., a comma is needed after *you*. A preferable wording, however, would be: ... to have the chance of working with you, *and I retain the most agreeable memories* of the moments spent in your company.

- Slovenia signed the Treaty of Accession to the European Union and the general atmosphere in Athens is correspondingly solemn.

Slovenia did not sign the Treaty *and* the general atmosphere! A comma is needed after *Union*. Since the new member states were presumably pleased to be joining the EU, the atmosphere was more likely to have been *appropriately/suitably ceremonial* rather than *correspondingly solemn*. (This is a dictionary-style translation from the SL: ... *in splošno vzdušje tu v Atenah je temu primerno slovesno*.)

Confusing comma:

- We make packaging that envelops, protects and attracts the eye.

The packaging envelops and protects *the product* – not *the eye*.

Possible rewording: Our packaging envelops and protects – and (it) also attracts the eye. The dash helps to remove any latent ambiguity.

Word order & choice of words

Ambiguity:

- (West Europe can take as an example and ideal the Marshall Plan, which helped in strengthening its damaged economies.) The truth is that there is no longer the danger of expanding communism, the main motive for the Marshall Plan.

There is probably no risk of misunderstanding this tightly worded sentence, yet it does beg the reader to fill in the gaps. What was the main motive for/of the Marshall Plan? It was not *the danger of expanding communism* but, rather *to counteract* or prevent the danger. Rewording: ... no longer the danger of *the expansion of communism*, *the prevention* of which was the main motive of the Marshall Plan.

- (The role of the CSCE High Commissioner for the Minorities is of the utmost importance.) His activities have fully justified his existence in a relatively short period of time.

One is almost tempted to add: "Long may he live!" Suggested rewording: Within a relatively short period (of time), the Commissioner's role has been fully justified by his activities/achievements.

- Being a country with a small market, companies dealing with the supply of goods are monopolists.

Strictly (or pedantically) speaking, the phrase *Being a country* refers forwards to *companies*, not backwards to the country mentioned earlier. Pam Peters⁴, commenting on the *dangling participle* (*Being*), notes that: "Depending on how or where they were educated, people may be highly sensitive or indifferent to *dangling participles*." In the sentence above, the clumsiness could be avoided by slightly altering the opening structure, e.g. *Since our/this country has a small market, (those) companies dealing with the supply of goods become monopolists*.

(On the same topic, a reviewer in *The Listener* described the following as "one of the most inane lines of verse in English poetry": *Shaving this morning, I looked out of the window*.)

- (The hazard of landslides has become a major concern of the population in the risk areas) as well as of the state authorities that come to the assistance of those affected by financial resources.

The state authorities come to the assistance of those affected, by *providing* financial resources. The crucial verb is missing.

Official and state visits to a country always generate a flurry of last-minute letters, timetables, programmes, draft speeches and press releases - all URGENTLY NEEDED.

Pressure on the translators (and editors) is great. I well recall having to check the press information for the visit of the late Pope John Paul II to Slovenia. I received the material at 11.00, and the papal plane was due to arrive at 13.00! Below are two of the (slight) errors I did not have time to correct:

- In the middle of the presbytery stands the male choir from Celje; as soon as the Pope takes his seat it performs the composition "Totus tuus".

Referential words, such as *it, they, them, those*, etc. easily lead to ambiguity. It was the *choir*, and not the *seat* that performed "Totus tuus".

- The reader reads the reading lesson from Apostle Peter's Second letter in Hungarian language.

⁴Peters, Pam, 2004, *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

St. Peter did not, presumably, write in Hungarian. Suggested rewording: The lector reads, in Hungarian, the Lesson from St. Peter's Second Letter. (Note: in Slovenia, both Italian and Hungarian are administratively approved as official languages.)

Negative structures

We now move on to an area where source language influence can be strongly felt. Direct imitation of the SL word order, particularly in clauses containing *not* (*ne/ni* in Slovene), may be misleading in translation. For instance:

- (The European Union can help in arousing hope in the Western Balkans if the region remains in the centre of its attention) and a privileged recipient of its assistance until the situation does not improve.

Positive in English: ... until the situation *improves*. (SL = dokler se stanje *ne izboljša*.)

- (An appropriate economic policy would enable the country to look forward to membership in the European organizations) despite the fact that all the EU's convergence criteria would not be met by the year 2000.

Essential change in word order: ... despite the fact that *not all* the EU's convergence criteria *would be met* ...

- (The Port of Koper is one of Slovenia's most powerful traffic magnets) and one which is not important only for Slovenia, but also for Austria and all other East European countries.

The reader's eye is momentarily distracted by the word combination *is not important*. The stress should be on *is important*: ... which is important not only for Slovenia, but also for Austria ... (SL = *ki ni pomemben samo za Slovenijo*.)

Similarly:

- The (radioactive) waste package is not important only for disposal, it plays an important role during the whole lifetime of waste ...

The waste package *is* important, *not only* for disposal, it plays an essential role during the whole lifetime ... Again, the *not* has been misplaced in translation.

- (The control of TIR and ATA carnets has been provided by the local information network since 1993.) All customs offices are not connected to this system.

Not all customs offices *are* connected ...

Sometimes an over-emphatic note is struck in the combination *will not*, as here:

- The admission of new states into NATO will only contribute to the opening up of the organization's security cooperation with all those states which will not become members for different reasons.

The reader is already partly misled by the expression *will only contribute to ...*, which implies contribute - but nothing more. This leads to further misunderstanding when we reach *all those states which will not become members*. In this case, the editor needs to help the writer say what is actually meant:

- The admission of new states into NATO *will further contribute to* the opening up of the organization's security cooperation with all those states *which, for various reasons, are not yet due to be admitted as members*.

In passing, we might also mention the over-emphatic use of *will* in positive structures:

- Upon arrival at the Dubrovnik old city harbour you will be taken on a sightseeing walk. (Tourist brochure)

This sounds more like a threat than an invitation. Try: *...you will be able to enjoy a (guided) sightseeing walk*. A similar disguised threat is contained in this hotel mini-bar instruction: *Please note that you have drunk. You will pay for it on leaving at the reception*.

In informal contexts, *will* may bring a chill where warmth is intended:

- If it is possible for you, we need all of the texts corrected by Monday morning. When you will fax us back the corrected text, please don't forget to let us know the price for your work. Thank you very much for your help and cooperation.

An *-ing* form would restore the warmth: ... *When faxing* us back.

Source language influence

I shall restrict myself to just two characteristic examples of the numerous forms of SL influence.

I. The "anaconda" sentence

This winds on, seemingly interminably:

- I propose that the date of your visit, which will provide an excellent opportunity for the exchange of our views on further development of bilateral cooperation between our two countries and on various issues and challenges the international community is facing, be agreed upon later.

The main point of the letter is: Can we agree later upon the date of your visit? This should be clearly stated and not interrupted by the (verbose) intervening comment. One possible improvement – while still retaining the single sentence – would be to begin by stating *what is proposed*, followed by the protocol description: *I propose that we agree later upon the date of your visit, which will provide ...*

A far better solution, however, would be to split the sentence into two: i) *Your visit will provide an excellent opportunity for ...* ii) *May I propose, then, that the date (of your visit) be agreed upon later?*

With general, non technical texts, this technique of splitting lengthy sentences into two or even three “digestible” parts does improve the clarity. With legal and technical texts, however, the approach should be used with caution.

II. Metaphor, imagery and purple patches

One person’s slogan may be another person’s cliché. The more “international” a word or expression sounds, the more likely it is to filter its way into the SL, and then be reproduced in translation.

- TONCITY TRADE CENTER – A bridge between the Pacific and Europe. Can a coastal-based trade centre be a trans-maritime bridge?

- INTEREUROPA – The gateway between central and eastern Europe. Gateway to? Fifty years ago, Peter Sellers drew attention to *gateway* in his satirical tourist guide to: *Balham – Gateway to the South*. The cliché has lost none of its enduring force.

Other words and expressions which abound in similar contexts include: *melting-pot*, *thriving hub*, *crossroads* (of cultures), *silent witness to*, *narrow cobbled streets*, *bustling heart*, *brehtaking beauty*, *idyllic setting*, and the dearly beloved *pearl*:

- Korčula represents a *pearl necklace* to all those who love the sea.

Can an island represent a pearl necklace? Or perhaps *nurse* one:

- The island of Mljet nurses the most valuable *pearl* of mother nature.

Even cities have their pearls:

- Zagreb’s surroundings are like a beautiful *pearl necklace* around it.

So, too, does the countryside:

Discover this beautiful part of north-eastern Slovenia, *the pearl of unspoilt nature and its friendly inhabitants*.

Would a comma after *nature* help?

It would be easy to dismiss such as examples as mere instances of international jargon, unworthy of further attention. For the translator or editor,

however they are delicate matters, because the texts usually appear in expensively produced publications, ranging from colour brochures to coffee-table books, often lavishly illustrated. The text should not be inferior to the illustrations.

For the translator, the consolation may be that texts originally written in English may be no better:

- The Panama Canal, fruit of dreams of centuries, is now the pivot of a dream cruise. (Publicity brochure for "Princes Cruises")

As John Humphrys notes: "Jargon respects no known laws of nature".⁵



In this article, I have concentrated on some aspects of language which, in translation, may unintentionally give rise to misunderstanding. I should like to end by mentioning the unsung achievements of translators and editors who – day by day – spare prominent persons from embarrassment by spotting flaws and ambiguities in their texts before they are publicly released. One example must suffice: the draft version of a press release on the International Trust Fund for de-mining.

- (The correct orientation of the ITF is also confirmed by the fact that the Fund's Board of Advisors) approved the extension of its activities to the territory of *the Republic of Croatia and Kosovo*, also strewn with numerous anti-personnel mines *which hinder the return of people back to normal life and thus indirectly the creation of prosperity* in this region.

(my emphasis)

The main error here, i.e. the implication that there is a Republic of *Croatia and Kosovo*, would have been a diplomatic blunder, which the translator-as-editor has neatly avoided in the revision:

- ... the extension of its activities to the territory of the Republic of Croatia and to Kosovo, also strewn with anti-personnel mines *which hinder the return of people to normal life, thus indirectly impeding the creation of prosperity* in this region.

The reader cannot know how often, and where, the translator has come to the rescue.

⁵ Humphrys, John, 2004, *Lost for Words*, Hodder & Stoughton, London