

STROKOVNI ČLANKI

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Beyond the Dictionary

a survey of some recurrent problems in Slovene-English translation

Česar ni v slovarju

pregled nekaterih najpogostejših vprašanj pri slovensko-angleškem prevajanju

Članek obravnava specifične težave s katerimi se slovenski strokovni prevajalci danes srečujejo pri svojem delu. Avtor se je osredotočil na tisto vrsto prevajalskih problemov, ki se ne dajo rešiti s pomočjo slovarja ali strokovnjaka, ki se spozna samo na določeno področje, ne pa tudi na jezik, nasvete prevajalcem pa je podkrepil z avtentičnimi primeri iz svoje prevajalske prakse. Članek je razdeljen na tri poglavja. Prvo govori o prevajalskih težavah na besedni ravni. Avtor obravnava slovenske besede, kot so "predstavljati," "namreč," "edinstven," "oziroma," "v okviru," ki se največkrat ne morejo dobesedno prevajati v angleščino. Drugo poglavje obravnava stavčno strukturo ali skladnjo. Avtor ugotavlja, da se skladnja slovenskega stavka ne ujema s skladnjo angleškega, to pa je vzrok za netočnosti v prevodu. Prevajalcu daje nasvete, kam v prevedenem angleškem stavku postaviti glagol, kako pravilno poudariti angleški stavke in kako učinkovito uporabiti vrinjeni stavek. Tretje poglavje je posvečeno pomenu in obravnava vprašanja gostobesednosti, nejasnosti, dvoumnosti in nepopolnosti prevoda.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to gather together, and synthesize, some of the experience I have gained over several years of working with translators in Slovenia.

The examples quoted are drawn mainly from material used at various translation seminars and courses, mainly those organized by the Ekonomska fakulteta, DZTPS, and Krka. All examples are authentic and all (but for one) are drawn from Slovene sources. For reasons of confidentiality these sources are not named; and, in order to keep the text as short as possible, the Slovene original is only occasionally quoted.

As I hope the title may suggest, this paper deals mainly with questions which cannot be resolved directly by consulting the dictionary or reference works. Although the matters we will be discussing cannot easily be pinned down under a single heading, since there will always be overlap between the areas (e.g. punctuation, word order, meaning), I have nevertheless tried to give coherence to the material by arranging it under three main headings: **Words, Structure, Meaning**. Each section begins with some brief general remarks followed by specific illustrations.

In the examples, heavy type is used to indicate where the problems lie, and in most cases a possible **Rewording** is offered.

This rewording is intended as a suggestion, not as a definitive solution.

I am aware that, in this short space, I could do no more than touch upon the questions that "lie beyond the dictionary". I hope, however, that the examples given may serve as a useful "check-list" for translators.

Finally, I should like to add that my purpose in writing this paper was to be constructive rather than critical. Only lack of space has prevented me from discussing some of the many examples of good - indeed, excellent - translation I have come across in my work. This, I hope, may be the theme of a future paper.

I. WORDS

General

To begin with, I should like to touch upon some of the words and expressions which are overused, or incorrectly used, in Slovene-English translation.¹ These are words which, because they so frequently occur in SL texts, are often automatically translated by the nearest dictionary equivalent: **namreč**/namely, **edinstven**/unique, **hkrati**/simultaneously, at the same time, **predstavlja**/represents, etc.

What I have in mind here are not words which are sometimes difficult to translate (e.g. **nosilec**, **podoba**), but rather words which are deceptively easy to translate and which, for this very reason, may distort the sentence (in English), e.g.

- Our spa is a **unique** one **for** its medical and tourist **offer** is **based on** four natural resources.
- The new collection of Elan skis is made by high technology production **principles due to which** the **requests** and needs of consumers can better be satisfied.

Although we have no difficulty in understanding these sentences, a **more natural** wording in English might be:

- Our spa, with its four natural resources, **offers/provides** an exceptional combination of medical and tourist facilities.
- The new, high-technology Elan skis are guaranteed to satisfy the requirements of even the most demanding customers.

This leads us, then, to a general question: what are the main strategies for dealing with SL influence at the lexical level?

I suggest that they are:

- Rewording/re-thinking
- Substitution
- Omission

To illustrate this, let me take three typical examples of the (mis)use of a particular word: **namely**.

i The advantages of omeprazole over ranitidine were particularly evident in patients who were concomitantly treated with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory agents. This therapy had **namely** no effect on the efficacy of omeprazole, but it significantly reduced the efficacy of ranitidine.

ii The children showed significant clinical improvement, **namely** a full winter season passed without any serious problems.

iii The documents expected by Dr. K will be duly sent, **namely** in accordance with the requirements of points 2-4 of your letter.

In the first example, rewording is needed, e.g. While this therapy had no adverse effect on the efficacy of omeprazole, it did significantly reduce the effect of ranitidine. In the second, **namely** could be replaced by the simple connective - **and**. In the third example, **namely** can simply be omitted.

Here, a general point may be made, which is this: dictionary equivalents for specific words can be misleading because they do not always indicate the **frequency of use** of the word in the respective languages. In this case, the English usage is more restrictive than the Slovene; **namely** (in English) is used almost exclusively to specify particular details, as here:

We believe the key elements on which our UK success is built - **namely**, low expenses, high quality staff, and innovative products - can be exported.

(The Equitable Life Assurance Society)

Let us take, briefly, one more set of examples in which the same strategies might be used. Here, the focal word is **represent(s)**:

i In the domestic trade, more than 50 per cent of actual sales represent wood and building materials, and the rest building and engineering services.

Rewording: In the domestic trade, more than 50 per cent of actual sales derive from wood and building materials, and the remainder from building and engineering services.

ii The TDC (Time-Date Clock) **represents** a microprocessor-designed time system for displaying of time and date.

Rewording: The TDC is a microprocessor-designed system for time and date display.

iii Very good results with Danazol were obtained, particularly in the treatment of endometriosis and of other diseases, such as gynaecomastia, where it **represents** the only possible medication.

Rewording: ... and of other diseases, such as gynaecomastia, for which it is the only possible medication.

Some further examples

One area in which SL influence on choice of words is particularly evident is that of letter writing. If the tone of the translation is not quite right (too formal, too informal, too vague, etc.) it is often because words or expressions which are quite acceptable in Slovene have been rendered into English on a one-to-one basis.

For instance: **s tem pismom**/by this letter, **Lepo Vas prosim(o)**/We kindly ask you, **Kot vam je znan**/As you know, etc. Below are some typical examples:

- **By this letter** I would like to confirm part of the discussions we had in Biochemie on 20 November.

Rewording: I am writing to confirm/recapitulate part of the discussions we had at Biochemie ...

- **I ask you kindly** to contact the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia for further arrangement of your visit.

Rewording: For further arrangements, please contact/you are requested to contact the Ministry ...

(Note: the word **kindly**, in English, is not quite as "kind" as it looks! It tends to sound very formal, even rather cold.)

- **We kindly ask you** to let us know, if there is a possibility of buying from you cleaning products ... in bulk.

Rewording: Could you please let us know if we will be able to buy from you ...

- **Please understand this letter** as the beginning of our cooperation.

Rewording: We trust/hope that this letter may mark the beginning of our cooperation.

It must, however, be added that certain standard expressions in formal writing can - and even should - be translated by the closest English equivalent, e.g. **Čast mi je, da Vas lahko obvestim**/I have the honour of informing you that, ..., **To priložnost bi želel izkoristiti tudi za povabilo, da v primernem času obiščete Republiko Slovenijo**./I should also like to take this opportunity of inviting you to visit the Republic of Slovenia at your earliest convenience. Even in formal language, however, some flexibility must be maintained. An expression such as **Prepričan sem**, for instance, is probably not best translated by a dictionary equivalent such as "I am convinced that ...", e.g.

- **Prepričan sem, da se bo po vzpostavitvi diplomatskih odnosov med ... in Republiko Slovenijo sodelovanje med državama še okrepilo.**

Here, several openings are possible in English: I am persuaded that/I firmly believe that/or, more simply - and this would be my preference - "I feel sure that the establishment of full diplomatic relations between ... and the Republic of Slovenia will lead to the further strengthening of relations between our two states"(or, the further strengthening of mutual relations).

There is space here to mention only in passing certain other expressions which frequently recur in translation, and which might be avoided, altered or omitted. For instance:

- This article deals with the process of political modernization in the frame of Slovenia during the last decade.

Rewording: omit the frame of ...

- In the second part of the eighties, the old liberals of the seventies started to revitalize their ideas. **Parallel to this, the old liberals initiated the co-opting** of the new, younger generation of politicians.

Rewording: At the same time, they began co-opting ...

- Our research work is **oriented to** the theory and application of modern methods of computer control **as well as** to modelling and simulation of dynamic processes. **Significant stress is given also to** the development of a ... computer-aided programme.

Rewording: oriented towards; Importance is also being given to ...

- The contracting parties agree to intensify progressively and continuously mutual cooperation **concurrently with extending it also to** other similar products.

Rewording: and to extend this cooperation to ...

Note: In translation, it is often preferable to repeat a noun - **cooperation** - than to use a vaguer referential word such as **it** or **this**.)

- The Laboratory is involved **also** in colour vision and texture analysis. **Some work is dedicated also to** areas related to computer vision.

Rewording: The Laboratory is also involved in colour vision and texture analysis, and in areas related to computer vision.

- A step forward is **also** the highly condensed core substance beneath the feet. It diminishes persistency along the longitudinal axis, **due to which** the skis behave well **also** in extreme conditions. A novelty **are also** the profiled laminates.

Rewording: A further step forward is the highly condensed core substance beneath the feet, which diminishes persistency along the longitudinal axis. As a result, the skis behave well even in extreme conditions. Yet another novelty is the profiled laminate.

As I hope may be seen from these few examples, it is possible to detect in Slovene-English translation certain patterns in word usage which clearly derive directly from the SL,

and which - because they are often repeated, and may therefore **seem** correct - tend to pass unnoticed.

II. STRUCTURE

General

Here we shall be mainly concerned with word order, and with allied questions such as: punctuation, sentence linkers (**vendarle, torej, čeprav** etc.), and mixed structures or mis-constructions.

Let us now, briefly, survey the terrain.

Word order is crucial to a proper understanding of the text. It is, in a sense, the "backbone" of the translation. The problem is that the backbone of the Slovene sentence may not match that of the English sentence, and vice versa. Thus an accurate translation may still be hard to understand, on account of the complex word order. As here:

- In the area of dynamics, **the power system medium and long term stability in the frame of dynamic security assessment and voltage is studied.**

A sentence such as this would be much easier to understand if the main points were clarified by a change of word order, e.g.:

- In the area of dynamics, studies are being made on the medium- and long-term stability of the power system in the assessment of dynamic security and voltage.

What we have here, I think, is an example of the often-encountered conflict between Slovene and English syntax: technical expressions (perhaps even quotations?) in English, such as "the power system medium and long term stability", are occasionally introduced into a sentence in which they do not quite fit.

Another common error in word order is that of misplaced reference or association, as in these two medical examples:

- In patients with impaired renal function, **the quinolones** pertain to advantageous drugs for treatment of infections due to their low toxicity.

Rewording: ... the quinolones, due to their low toxicity, pertain to advantageous drugs.

- In patients with high blood pressure the therapy with diuretics should be withdrawn for at least 2-3 days prior to treatment with ENAP, if possible, otherwise the risk of hypotension is increased.

Rewording: ... the therapy with diuretics should, if possible, be withdrawn ...

Punctuation could be described as "the good manners" of writing, an act of courtesy towards the reader. Its importance should not be underestimated. A small comma, for instance, can make a great difference. Compare: "The use of washing powders which contain bleach should be avoided", and "The use of washing powders, which contain bleach, should be avoided." Or: "I said nothing which I regret" and "I said nothing, which I regret".

In translation from Slovene, one of the commonest punctuation errors is the misuse of the comma (in English) following the SL usage: **verjamemo, da ... upam, da**, etc. For instance:

- We hope, you will be interested in such cooperation.
- We believe, that there is an appropriate demand for such products on our market.

A further, more complex error involves the wrong combination of punctuation marks, thus disrupting the structure of the sentence:

- In the lower urinary tract bacterial infections we will continue to use only the uroantiseptic quinolones - except in pregnancy, in addition to ... trimethoprim sulfonamides.

Rewording: In the treatment of bacterial infections of the lower urinary tract we will - except in pregnancy - continue to use only the uroantiseptic quinolones, in addition to trimethoprim sulfonamides.

The advantage of the double dash - particularly in technical writing - is that it allows for incidental information to be included without disrupting the main flow of the sentence.

Although much more could be said on this subject², I shall restrict myself to just one general remark. In texts which contain complex groups of words, the translator should assist the

reader by using punctuation to make the sense clear. Here are two examples:

- In collaboration with other research groups a general purpose block oriented graphical interactive package was developed.

Reformulation: In collaboration with other research groups, a general purpose block-oriented graphical interactive package was developed.

- In experimental studies for the measurement of phagocytosis and intracellular activity PMNL and alveolar macrophages of rodents were used.

Reformulation: a comma is needed after activity.

Structure If we disregard straightforward errors of language (e.g. misuse of tenses), then the most common structural defects in translation would seem to be:

- Mixed structures
- Incomplete structures
- SL-influenced structures
- Structures resulting in mis-placed emphasis

Let us consider four characteristic examples.

i Mixed structures

- Various institutions are taking advantage of the photometric equipment of the Laboratory for **testing, controlling, and comparisons** of different instruments engaged in measurements of lighting systems.

Rewording: Various institutions are taking advantage (of the facilities) of the Laboratory for the testing, control and comparison of the various instruments used in the measurement of lighting systems. (Or: ... for testing, controlling and comparing the various instruments ...)

Note: Many native speakers make the same error, i.e. that of mixing verbal or gerundive forms (**testing**) with nouns (**comparison**). We can also detect SL influence in the (unnecessary) use of the plural: **comparisons, measurements**.

ii Incomplete structures

- The results of this study suggest that enalapril has **at least an equal and probably better antihypertensive effect than** propranolol ... Our findings with the systemic quinolones convince us that they are **as effective or even more effective than** the currently available oral antibiotics.

Rewording: ... enalapril has an antihypertensive effect which is at least equal to - and probably better than - that of propranolol. ... convince us that they are as effective as - or even more effective than - the currently available oral antibiotics.

Note: This is a further example of the usefulness of the double dash for interjections.

iii SL-influenced structures

- (Otoški biser je grad iz 13. stoletja, ki leži na majhnem otoku sredi Krke in čigar okolica je **tako čudovita, da prevzame še tako zahtevnega obiskovalca**. Popeljali se boste lahko s čolnom po reki krki, **ki nudi tudi ostale pogoje** za rekreacijo: ...)

The pearl of Otočec is the Castle on a Krka islet dating back from the 13th century with its wonderful surroundings **overcoming even the very fastidious visitor. You will be able to ride in a boat on the Krka river offering also other facilities** for recreation: ...

Rewording: ... with its wonderful surroundings, which would impress even the most exigent/demanding visitor. There are also many facilities for recreation, including: boat-rides on the river Krka, ...

Note: The translator has, in fact, tried to **avoid** the influence of the SL text, but this has led to confusion of structures in the English ("surroundings overcoming ... Krka river offering").

iv Mis-placed emphasis

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

Rewording: We make packaging that not only protects the product, but also --- attracts the eye.

Note: Although the language of advertising is, in a sense, "special", this example reminds us of an important point: if there are several verbs and nouns in the same sentence, make sure that the relations between them are clear.

To conclude this section, special mention should be made of a problem familiar to most translators: where to place the verb? (or, where should the verb be placed?). This question is particularly relevant to the translation of scientific and academic articles. Consider, for instance, this typical translation:

- **Planned are** research and application of neural networks on the field of sensors ... **Beside this**, study of mutual interferences between nonionizing radiations and biologic systems ... **is conducted**.

Rewording: Future plans include research and application of ... In addition, studies are being conducted on/into mutual interferences ...

Note: In this respect, i.e. linking a list of items to the main verb, Slovene is perhaps more flexible than English. As the example above shows, the English verb (or participle) - whether in first or in final position - is often "unhappy". We cannot begin a sentence (though I often wish we could!) with expressions such as: **planned are, studied are, demonstrated are** ... Thus, some form of inversion or re-wording is required, e.g. **future plans include, the research involves studies on, the main points demonstrated are:** ... etc.

Conversely, if the verb (**is conducted**) comes right at the end of the sentence, it usually comes too late, and must be shifted to an earlier position.

One final word of advice to translators: whenever you incorporate into your work expressions

or formulations drawn from journals published in English, make sure that they fit properly into the structure of your own text.

III MEANING

"Oh yes, he means what he says, but does he say what he means?"

(comment on a British politician)

If we set aside the fact that the SL text may be defective - as translators (often justifiably) might claim - it would seem that most confusion over meaning is due rather to faulty structure than to misunderstanding of the sense.

For convenience, we shall consider typical errors under three general headings:

- i Structural defects
- ii Overtranslation/Undertranslation
- iii Ambiguity

i Structural defects

These range from minor points of language - e.g. omission of the article, faulty word order or punctuation - to complex questions, such as the sequence of thought. Two examples:

- (In this paper) **few design examples** illustrating the capabilities of an expert design CAD tool are shown.

Rewording: This paper also includes **a few** / some design examples illustrating ...

The missing article (**few/a few**) makes a great difference to the meaning!

- Teotard's more equalized therapeutic plasma levels **correlated with less side effects gives it an advantage over** aminophylline sustained release tablets.

Rewording: The chief advantage of Teotard over aminophylline sustained-release tablets is that it ensures/achieves/maintains more equalized plasma levels with fewer correlated side-effects.

Note:

a) Linguistically, the original translation is not incorrect. The meaning, however, does not come through clearly on first reading (possibly because of SL influence on the word order?). In English, as a general rule,

the main point of the sentence - **the advantage** of Teotard over aminophylline - is signalled as early as possible; then follow the details.

b) In technical literature, there is an increasing tendency to omit the hyphen in compounds, even though this may lead to temporary confusion (e.g. sustained release tablets). The translator is clearly correct in following established practice; but in cases of doubt I would suggest - keep the hyphen.

- (The efficiency of this law depends on the successfulness of changes in other fields.) These will to a much higher degree than the law itself reveal how much trust foreign capital as well as the domestic one can place in us.

Rewording: Far more than the law itself, these changes will reveal how much trust can be placed in us by foreign and domestic investors.

As a general word of advice, I suggest: if you are dealing with a sentence which looks awkward or seems unclear, **try reading it aloud** - in both languages. This will usually help you to pinpoint the defect.

ii Overtranslation/undertranslation

Meaning can be blurred by having too many words, or too few, in the sentence. Of these two defects the former, I think, is the more common. In overtranslation, one can usually detect powerful source language influence. Two typical examples, in which most of the words in dark type are unnecessary:

- **In the imports** of wood, **on one hand**, and exports of pulp and paper products, **on the other**, **a number of** paper manufacturers in Slovenia **take part**, for instance the paper-mill Količevo.

Rewording: Several paper manufacturers in Slovenia, such as the paper-mill at Količevo, are importers of wood and exporters of pulp and paper products. (Or: ... are engaged in the import of wood and the export of pulp ...)

- As trade fairs and exhibitions have been for **many years** an integral part of investments **made in the market**, we can say that such a planned policy has brought rich returns **so far**. With well planned performances we have achieved important business results, **accompanied by** new experience acquired by **every new manifestation**, which **constantly contributed** to improve our reputation.

This passage is so wordy and repetitive that it defeats its own purpose, which should be: to stress the wisdom of the company's investment policy and to highlight its recent achievements. If one glances only at the words **not** underlined, one can begin to discern the main points, which could concisely expressed as:

Rewording: Trade fairs and exhibitions have long been vital to our (carefully) planned policy of market investment. This policy has brought rich returns: improved business results, valuable new experience, greater success at trade fairs, and an enhanced international reputation.

One of the difficulties for the translator is that (s)he is usually obliged to stick "faithfully" to the wording of the SL text. Hence the heaviness of so much translation. One final example, without comment, should suffice:

- Slovenia's favourable traffic position in the heart of Europe, **and** the well-known hospitality **as well as the sense for organization** of Slovenes **add to the development of** all kinds of tourism: summer and winter vacations, rural holidays, tours and excursions, hiking, fishing, hunting, mountain climbing, health tourism ... **and others**.

And so on!

Undertranslation is, perhaps, less easy to detect. This may be because it is harder to supply the missing words than to remove the superfluous ones. In many cases, the changes needed are slight: a "small" word - such as **which, this, these, however, and** - will often be enough to fill the gap. In longer sentences, repetition of a noun verb, or preposition may be necessary for clarity, for instance:

- The entire exhibition and sales areas cover about 50,000 sq.m., **while storage areas more than 120,000 sq.m.**

Here, it would be advisable either to repeat the verb **cover**, or to use a synonym, e.g. ... while storage areas **extend over** an area of ...

One of the commonest features of undertranslation is the use of compound expressions e.g.:

- The laboratories are involved in the development of a system **for human faces identification**, based on anthropological parameters.

Here the longer construction - for the identification of human faces - might be easier to understand.

The danger of omitting too many words is well illustrated by the following example (SL German):

- A large group of authors accepts the analogy explicitly or suggests more or less clearly in **the formulations they choose agreement** with this position.

Here, the omission of two vital words - **which** and **that** - has made the sentence almost impossible to understand.

Rewording: Many authors accept the analogy, or have suggested more or less clearly in the formulations (which) they have chosen that they are in agreement with this position.

This leads us, then, to the final point:

iii Ambiguity

Ambiguity may be intentional, as in the "compliments" which actors invent when asked to comment on a fellow-actor's performance, e.g. "My dear, you've done it again!", or "You showed us a side of Hamlet we've never seen before". Or unintentional, as in these comments heard on the BBC:

- She has two children and a new car every year.

- Greenpeace would like to see environmental health officers more involved in the pollution of rivers.
- The public will get more for their money - but they will have to pay more for it!
- A hole has appeared in the road. Fife police are looking into it.
- Scotland Yard admitted that the police drew their guns, but declined to say whether the man had been held at gun-point.

In translation, ambiguity often results from too close an adherence to the SL wording, as here:

- The present overview of the research work at the Faculty of --- is **organized as the presentation of the majority of the laboratories.**

Here, the distracting word is **organized**.

Rewording: This survey is intended to be an overview of the research work conducted in most of the laboratories of the Faculty.

In legal documents, the risk of ambiguity is ever-present:

- The AGENT agrees not to **represent** other companies **except those already represented with competitive products** or to render, in any form, any services to such companies without previously obtaining written permission.

Rewording: The AGENT agrees not to promote competitive products on behalf of any companies other than those already represented ...

Note: Confusion is created by the double use of **represent**, hence the need for rewording (re-thinking).

- The AGENT agrees to promote to its greatest extent the Licensed Product **in the Territory at its own expense.**

Rewording: The AGENT undertakes to promote at its own expense, and to the greatest possible extent, the Licensed Product within the territory.

In medicine, too, unintentional ambiguities may occur, e.g.:

- As already mentioned, calcium is excreted with feces, urine and sweat. **Besides** the calcium, **which** is not absorbed from food, the calcium from the saliva, bile, pancreatic and intestinal juice **are** found in the feces.

The most probable meaning is:

Rewording: In addition to the calcium (which is) not absorbed from food, the faeces also contain calcium from the saliva, bile, etc. ...

This example further illustrates the usefulness of shifting the verb, in English, from a final to a mid-way position, thus allowing the sentence to conclude with the items listed.

Finally, to end on a more light-hearted note, two examples of unintentional ambiguity which recently caught my eye:

- The natural landscape has been protected by law, so as not to upset the natural harmony. You will get a warm and hospitable welcome at the tourist farms here.

Tourist farming - a new industry?

- The risk of crystalluria exists in patients who do not drink enough, especially in elderly patients.

Well, let's have another glass of wine, then. Na zdravje!

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NOTES:

¹ For a thorough treatment of Slovene-English false friends, see Marjan Golobič, *Mostovi* 1988, posebna številka

² For more on punctuation, see Alan Duff, *The Third Language* Pergamon, 1981.