CZECH-ENGLISH TRANSLATION DIFFICULTIES ARISING FROM DIFFERENCES IN WORD ORDER

This work deals with Czech-English translation difficulties that result from differences in word order between the syntax of the two languages. A functional framework is used to interpret the implications of the syntactical differences. Both English and Czech have a tendency to present given information at the beginning of a clause and new information at the end, but the flexibility of Czech word order makes it possible to observe this principle more consistently than English syntax makes possible. Additionally, Czech, unlike English, does not observe the end-weight principle and therefore long stretches of circumstantial information do not prefer to be placed at the end of a clause. Both these differences result in significant mismatches in word order between Czech clauses and their English translation equivalents.

For reasons of length and simplicity, this work deals only with declarative clauses.

Information flow in Czech and English

Information flow refers to the principles that govern the ordering of given and new information in a clause. Both English and Czech prefer to place given information before new information, but this is not always possible due to the restrictions imposed by the subject-verb-object word order, and occasionally by the desire to place new information in the theme of the clause, that is at the beginning rather than at the end. When such restrictions apply, the grammars of both languages provide resources to overcome them and to indicate where the new information is, for example by means of intonational emphasis. We start our investigation with a review of these resources.

Intonation

Intonation is sometimes used in speech to place emphasis on a particular element. This in effect points the element out as the one carrying new information, as for example the following examples illustrate (from Basch 1998, p. 5 - underlined items are those emphasized in speech):

> _Joe_ will milk the goat.
> Joe will milk _the goat_.

The resource of intonation is not used in Czech as much as in English. English speakers sometimes observe that Czech sounds monotonous to them, as for example Melvyn and Jirkalová do in their essay on Czech-English translation problems. English, on the other hand, draws on this resource extensively in spoken communication.

When transcribed in written text, intonational emphasis is often indicated with italic or bold type, a practise which again is quite uncommon in written Czech. For example Šlancarová (1998) demonstrates in her on-line thesis that italics for emphasis are noticeably more common in English than in Czech.

Another popular method to transcribe intonational emphasis in writing is to use punctuation. This again is more common in English where the rules of punctuation are quite free-form. The rules of Czech punctuation are very restricted and cannot be manipulated for emphasis.

Word order

The word order of Czech is completely unrestricted. Any element can be moved to the front or to the end of a clause to convey different types of emphasis, and this resource is used by Czech speakers and writers copiously. For example, the following four clauses are all possible in Czech:

1. *Teta jela do Paříže.*
   [Aunt went-by-car to Paris.]

2. *Do Paříže jela teta.*
   [To Paris went-by-car aunt.]

3. *Teta do Paříže jela.*
   [Aunt to Paris went-by-car.]

4. *Do Paříže teta jela.*
   [To Paris aunt went-by-car.]

All four clauses sound natural to a native speaker and would be perfectly unmarked in the correct textual context. But they mean slightly different things, and the difference is in emphasis:

1. The first example has "aunt" as its theme and the rest of the clause as its rheme, which also constitutes new information. This clause would be suitable in a text where "aunt" is the topic of conversation, for example:

   Teta jela do Paříže. Ona nám určitě přiveze dárky.
   [Aunt went-by-car to Paris. She will surely bring us presents.]

2. The second clause has "to Paris" as its theme. The fact that it was aunt who went there and not somebody else is presented here as new information. The clause would fit well in a conversation where going to Paris is the topic, and the participants are trying to remember who went there:

   Do Paříže jela teta, ne strýc.
   [To Paris went-by-car aunt, not uncle.]
   = It was aunt who went to Paris, not uncle.

3. The third clause has "aunt" as theme, and the fact that she went there by car and not, say, by plane, is the new information. It would fit well in a conversation when the participants are talking about aunt and are trying to determine how she went to Paris:

   Teta do Paříže jela, ne letěla.
   [Aunt to Paris went-by-car, not flew.]
   = Aunt went to Paris by car, she didn't fly.

4. Finally, the fourth clause is similar to the third one but this time the theme is "to Paris". The new information is the same as previously. The clause would appear naturally in a conversation in which going to Paris was the topic, and the participants are trying to remember how aunt got there:

   Do Paříže teta jela, ale do Londýna letěla.
   [To Paris aunt went-by-car, but to London flew.]
   = To Paris, aunt went by car but to London, she flew.

English, on the other hand, has only limited facilities to swap items around in this way. Changing the word order often produces a change to the experiential meaning, as it does in the following famous pair of clauses:

Dog bites man.
Man bites dog.

Even when word order changes do not result in ambiguity, they still do result in strongly marked clauses which sound unusual. For example:

This cup the soldier gave my mother.

Czech, however, is a richly inflected language and this is the reason why word order changes almost never result in a change to transitivity ("who did what to whom"). In English, whether an item is the subject or the object of a verb is encoded by were it stands in the clause. In Czech, the noun is inflected to indicate whether it is a subject or an object, and the inflection then travels with it to wherever in the clause the noun ends up. For example, the Czech word for "man" is "člověk", but when it becomes the direct object of a verb it is inflected and changes to "člověka". For example:

Pes kouše člověka. [Dog-*subject* bites man-*object*.]
Člověka kouše pes. [Man-*object* bites dog-*subject*.]

This particular feature of Czech grammar affords numerous possibilities to express minute nuances in emphasis. Its absence in English, on the other hand, imposes restrictions on the translator. When translating from Czech into English, those nuances of emphasis which can so effortlessly be expressed in Czech must often be left unexpressed in English in order to avoid sounding overly verbose. On the opposite side, when translating from English into Czech, the translator must often make an effort to "read between the lines" and to reconstruct where the emphasis should be in order to avoid producing a Czech text where awkward word order results in bad cohesion.

Syntactical devices

In addition to intonation and word order, both languages provide syntactical structures which can be availed of to communicate emphasis on a particular element in the clause. A typical example is the passive. The passive is available in both English and Czech, although it is observably more common and less marked in English. In Czech, the passive usually produces the effect of high formality (as observed for example by Melvyn and Jirkalová). Many meanings which are expressed by the passive in English are better realized in Czech by changes in word order. For example (form Sgall and Panevová 2994,p. 107):

We were accompanied by our relatives.

In principle, it is possible to translate this into Czech using the passive:

Byli jsme doprovozeni našimi příbuznými.
[We were accompanied by our relatives.]

But this sounds rather convoluted to a native Czech speaker. A better option in most situations is to translate the clause in the active voice and to swap the words around so that "relatives" appear at the end, like they do in the original, thus preserving the principle of new information appearing at the end:

Doprovodili nás naši příbuzní.
[Accompanied us our relatives.]

Also available in both languages are various types of clefting (also called fronting), for example in English:

It was this cup that the soldier gave my mother.
What the soldier gave my mother was this cup.

And in Czech:

Byl to Václav Klaus, kdo řekl, že …
[It was Václav Klaus, who said that …]

Co tahle země potřebuje, je nižší inflace.
[What this country needs, is lower inflation.]

These devices are marked quite strongly in English and are only used when there is a strong reason for doing so, for example when the delivery of emphasis on the correct element is crucial to understanding the intended meaning. In Czech, these structures are marked even more and are used extremely rarely indeed. Even the most comprehensive grammar of Czech, the three-volume *Mluvnice češtiny* [Grammar of Czech], only devotes a single page to it, which Basch (1998, p. 11) explains by the "lack of need for this device in Czech, where we prefer to convey emphasis by word order".

The end-weight principle

One of the restrictions which may prevent new information from being placed at the end of a clause and given at the beginning is the end-weight principle. This principle is observed in English and dictates that long or circumstantial information prefers to be placed at the end of a clause, regardless of whether it is given or new. So for example in the following pair of sentences, the former one is less marked:

Unmarked: *Minors are not allowed in the café without adult supervision.*
Marked: *Without adult supervision minors are not allowed in the café.*

In the absence of any textual context, such as when this sentence appears as a sign on a café door, one must conclude that "<minors> without adult supervision" is effectively given information because it is the condition which must be fulfilled for the new information, "minors are not allowed in the café", to apply. However, the two items prefer to be presented in the opposite order, flowing seemingly illogically from new to given, on account of the end-weight principle.

Czech, however, does not know this principle. Long stretches of circumstantial information, even if it constitutes given information, can freely be placed at the beginning of a clause without looking awkward. So in the following pair of café door signs, the latter is the unmarked one:

Marked: *Dětem vstup zakázán bez doprovodu dospělých.*
                    [Is-not-permitted entry of children without accompaniment of adults.]

Unmarked: *Bez doprovodu dospělých dětem vstup zakázán.*
                    [Without accompaniment of adults entry of children is-not-permitted.]

The absence of the end-weight principle in Czech further frees up the way for information in a clause to flow from given to new, while its presence in English constitutes yet another reason why this flow direction is not always possible.

Implications for the translator

The differences outlined above sometimes result in difficulties for the translator who is not aware of them. If English-to-Czech translators always preserve the word order of an English clause, the resulting text will have bad cohesion in Czech because the information will not flow from given to new as regularly as Czech speakers require. And if translators always preserve English syntactical "tricks" such as clefting and fronting and carry them over to their Czech texts, the result will be awkward because of the high markedness of such constructions in Czech. Here is an English original and its bad Czech translation,[1] from Sgall and Panevová (2004, p. 112 – given information is underlined and new information is bold):

> *The Führer took out the record, inserted a new one, […] and **an old, old waltz** <u>came out</u> […].*
> *Führer vyňal desku, vložil jinou, […] a **starý, starý valčík** <u>se ozval</u> […].*

The translation is cognitively difficult to follow because a Czech reader expects the first item in a clause to be given information. When this is not the case the reader is confused. Here is the corrected translation which is much easier to follow:

> *Führer vyňal desku, vložil jinou, […] a <u>ozval se</u> **starý, starý valčík** […].*
> [= …and <u>came out</u> **an old, old waltz**]

On the other hand, translators working from Czech into English are faced by a completely different set of difficulties. The main problem is how to indicate in the target text which elements are given and which are new. Czech realizes these distinctions effortlessly by word order, but this is not always possible in English. The translator might recourse to techniques such as clefting or even italics, but those might result in the target text appearing more marked than is desired. Sometimes a sleight of hand is available in English, such as the use of definite and indefinite articles (which, incidentally, have no equivalent in Czech). Sgall and Panevová (2004, p. 107) observe that when a noun has an indefinite article it is understood to be new information, while if it has a definite article it is understood to be given information, regardless of where in the sentence it is. This can be illustrated on the following pair of examples (each consists of an original Czech sentence, its back-translation and its correct English translation, given information is underlined and new information is bold):

> <u>*Rovinou*</u> **protéká řeka**.
> [<u>Through plain</u> **flows river**.]
> *A river flows through the plain.*

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[1] Strictly speaking, the Czech text is not a translation. It is an original text written by the Czech-American author Ferdinand Peroutka in his novel, *Oblak a valčík* [The cloud and the waltz]. His reasons for choosing to use an English-styled word order are unknown. Sgall and Panevová (2004, p. 112) mention that they have observed readers to return and re-read the sentence, presumably needing more time to construct a coherent interpretation.

> *Řeka* **protéká rovinou**.
> [River **flows through plain**.]
> *The river flows through a plain.*

It remains a fact, however, that there are situations when no unmarked translation is possible that would preserve the given/new distinction, and the distinction must simply be left unexpressed in the target text, increasing the cognitive load on the reader to work out this aspect of the meaning for themselves.

Conclusion

Both Czech and English prefer to place given information at the beginning of a clause and new information at the end. But in English, this is not always possible due to restrictions imposed by the comparably rigid word order and by the end-weight principle. Czech, on the other hand, has extremely flexible word order rules and does not observe the end-weight principle, therefore the information flow from given to new is almost always possible. This results in difficulties for translators who are not aware of these differences.

This study is a case in point that "all languages differ in the possibilities and constraints offered by their grammars" (Mayor 2004, p. 60). Transferring meaning from one language to another is a delicate art of fitting the possibilities of the source language into the restrictions of the target language.

(2,420 words)

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