

Metaphor in L1-L2 novice translations

Metaphor is frequently viewed as a translation problem, “a kind of ultimate test of any theory of translation” (Toury, 1995, p. 81). Much focus in translation studies has revolved around the extent to which metaphor is translatable and the development of guidelines for metaphor translation. In addition, a growing body of research is being produced in the field of Descriptive Translation Studies, investigating what translations actually are rather than what they should be (see e.g. Rosa, 2010; Toury, 1995). The present study contributes to this endeavor through an exploration of the translation of metaphors found in the Norwegian-English Student Translation Corpus (NEST; <http://clu.uni.no/humfak/nest/>), a corpus of L2 learner language.

This investigation identifies and categorizes the translation of metaphors from 30 different Norwegian source texts (ST) in a total of 287 English translated texts (TT), thereby both describing individual translations and providing comparative descriptions of several TTs derived from the same ST. The paper focuses on the translations of three types of metaphors, identified using MIPVU (cf. Steen et al., 2010): 1) metaphorical verbs, codified in Norwegian, 2) idioms, which are often culture-specific and 3) potentially deliberate metaphorical expressions such as similes and other figurative analogies (cf. Nacey, 2013, pp. 168-173; Steen, 2008).

The informants have Norwegian as their L1, and are advanced L2 learners of the target language (TL) enrolled on one of several parallel tertiary-level translation courses taken as part of their English studies. The main goal of the translation courses was to raise language awareness, thereby increasing these learners’ English proficiency. Particular focus was placed upon Norwegian-English contrastive differences, both in terms of language and style. Some theory of translation was nonetheless included in the courses, even though they did not qualify students as translators. Of particular relevance for the current study was the emphasis placed on the principle of faithfulness, maintaining that the TTs should mirror the STs as closely as possible. The TTs are thus ‘overt translations’ inextricably and explicitly linked to the STs rather than ‘covert translations’ intended as original texts in their own right for their target audience (a distinction made by House, 2010).

The STs range from 200 to 900 words and cover many different topics and text types, so as to illustrate a variety of contrastive challenges for the learners to translate and discuss. Texts thus range from instructional pamphlets and newspaper articles to fictional prose. Most STs have multiple translations (mean = 9.5 TTs per ST).

Translated metaphors have been categorized following a version of Newmark’s (1981, pp. 88-91) proposed guidelines for translating metaphor, listed in Table 1 along with the translation strategy abbreviations adopted in this paper.

	Translation strategy	Abbreviation
1	Reproduction of the same SL metaphor in the TL	M → M
2	Replacement of the SL metaphor with a standard TL metaphor	M ₁ → M ₂
3	Translation of the SL metaphor by simile	M → S
4	Translation of metaphor (or simile) by simile plus sense [a literal gloss]	M/S → S + gloss
5	Conversion of metaphor to sense [a literal paraphrase]	M → P
6	Deletion of metaphor	M → ∅
7	Translation of metaphor by same TL metaphor plus sense [a gloss]	M → M + gloss

Table 1 Classification guidelines for metaphor translation

Newmark's proposed procedures constitute a top-down approach, based on an assumption that the translators want to render the metaphors "as accurately as possible, not to pare them down" (Newmark, 1981, p. 87). Actual translation occurrences were not consulted when drawing up the guidelines (see Fernández, 2011, p. 265). Thus, the present study adapts Newmark's classification system, modifying it as indicated by the translation solutions actually chosen by the students – thereby ending up with a classification that represents the data under study.

What follows is a sample analysis of one of the three types of metaphor under investigation: idioms. The NEST STs contain relatively few idioms, not unsurprising given e.g. Moon's (2007, p. 1050) research indicating that smaller corpora (< 100 million words) yield only isolated instances of idioms, except for 'anomalous local densities' of an idiom repeated in a single text. Nevertheless, because comprehension of unfamiliar idioms often depends upon some degree of shared cultural knowledge, they are of interest when investigating translation strategies of metaphor. Translation of idioms may pose particular problems when it comes to the balance between faithfulness to the ST and production of a TT that is both understandable and idiomatic for the text type in question.

One NEST idiom is found in a ST about the life of Norwegian author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. He is described as being an independent individualist with a characteristic 'kjerringa-mot-strømmen-holdning' [literal: hag-against-stream-attitude]. The phrase derives from a Norwegian folktale tale where a disagreeable wife argues with her husband about the best way to harvest grain. While he intends to mow the grain with a scythe, she insists that it be cut with shears; the husband finally silences his wife's nagging by drowning her in a nearby river. He later searches for her body to give her a proper funeral, only to find that she has drifted upstream, against the current. The idiom thus refers to people who are both stubborn and irritating, who do what they want without listening to others. While variants of this folktale are known in other cultures, there is no traditional English equivalent. Packing so much cultural information into a comprehensible English translation is challenging for novice translators, ten of whom translated this text. Their solutions are presented in Table 2 showing the different translations, NEST tags identifying TT and sentence, and categorization of translation strategy.

	Translation	TT ID tag (NEST_Opp_)	Translation strategy
1	characteristic for his "against-the-stream-attitude"	002en.s32	M → M (-)
2	characteristic to his "kjærringa mot strømmen" attitude (the Norwegian folktale about the old woman who always had to have her own way")	003en.s37	M → M (L1) + gloss
3	characteristic for his "going against the grain attitude"	004en.s37	M ₁ → M ₂
4	typical of his go against the stream-attitude	005en.s37	M → M (-)
5	characteristic for his "go against the grain" attitude	007en.s37	M ₁ → M ₂
6	characteristic of his "swimming upstream-nature "	008en.s30	M → M (-/+)
7	characteristic for his go against the grain-attitude	010en.s36	M ₁ → M ₂
8	characteristic for his "swimming-against-t(Steen et al., 2010)he-currant-attitude"	011en.s39	M → M (-/+)
9	characteristic of him to go against the current	014en.s43	M → M (-)
10	characteristic for his attitude of contrariness	159en.s38	M → P

Table 2 Translations of 'karakteristisk for hans kjerringa-mot-strømmen-holdning'
(NEST_Oppno.s38)

Only a single student chose an approximate literal paraphrase (M → P), this being the least popular translation strategy. Although all the others retained metaphor, none chose a pure M → M approach, with a literal transliteration of each element of the idiom. They have thus realized that an English readership may not have the necessary cultural background knowledge to fully understand the phrase when rendered word-for-word, and have produced alternative versions. In most cases, 'kjærringa' (literal: hag) has been dropped in the English version (hence the minus symbol in the translation strategy code). The one exception is Translation 2, where the core elements of the phrase remain in the original Norwegian (presumably evaluated as untranslatable), followed by lengthy explicitation – making this version arguably the least idiomatic of the ten translations. Six of the nine remaining cases retain the image of resistance to flowing water, alternatively translated as 'stream' (influenced by the partial false friend in the ST, Norwegian 'strøm'), 'current', or 'currant' (a spelling error). Two of these six add information to the metaphor by introducing the element of swimming (hence the plus symbol in the translation strategy code); swimming is, however, incoherent with the original story as the wife had been drowned, meaning that her body floated rather than swam.

Three of the students chose to substitute another TL metaphor, 'go against the grain', for the SL metaphor, the M₁ → M₂ strategy. The two metaphors are close in terms of semantics, but the M₂ metaphor introduces certain connotations absent from the SL metaphor – that is, someone doing something against the grain is performing an action unexpected of them contrary to one's normal inclination or disposition. By contrast, the wife from the folktale behaves true to form.

These translations offer several indications that the informants are still very much English language learners – this may be noted by the choice of 'stream' where 'current' or 'flow'

might be more appropriate, by the spelling error 'currant', and by the apparent lack of realization of the added connotation of the M₂ metaphor. In addition, most of the students demonstrate colligation problems, not realizing the standard English colligation is 'characteristic of'. The most common choice of preposition is 'for', the basic translation of Norwegian 'for' that is appropriate for the SL context. Nevertheless, what is evident from these translations is that all the informants in some way acknowledged the translation challenge raised by this idiom, by attempting to unpack the SL metaphor and repack it in the TL.

References

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1	Ordene <u>risser opp</u> den nye tilværelsen	The words <u>cut out</u> the new existence (NEST_Kri_013en.s60)	same TL image
		The words <u>shaped</u> the new way of life (NEST_Kri_001en.s61)	different TL image
2	"kjerringa-mot-strømmen-holding"	attitude of contrariness (NEST_Opp_115en.s38)	literal sense
		"going against the grain attitude" (NEST_Opp_004en.s37)	different TL image
3	som ild med en ring av lys omkring	like fire enclosed by a circle of light (NEST_Nor_013en.s16)	same TL image
		like fire all around within it ... (NEST_Nor_014en.s14)	partially deleted TL image