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Reliability of Observational Data: Towards a Theory of Comparative Stylistics

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1.1 One of the most essential contributions to a theory of translation ought to come from a theory of comparative stylistics. If it were not for the terminological paradoxon, we could call comparative stylistics a "grammar of style," determining the universal parameters of style, which have their values set differently in different languages. The following is offered as an illustration of the type of problem a theory of comparative stylistics would have to deal with.

The question as to which of the linguistic structures of the target language qualify as translations of an original relates to their linguistic adequacy as much as to their equivalence with the original. Linguistic adequacy is determined by the grammaticality of the forms chosen and by their stylistic adequacy, which comprises the adequate register and stylistic level as well as the stylistic quality of the forms used in the translation. While the assertion of grammaticality should not present too many problems, at least not for the native speaker, the decision about stylistic adequacy is mostly considered a matter of individual likings and dislikings, lacking any objectivity. If we are to justify the differences between an original and its translation that go beyond the grammatical differences between source and target language, the arguments we can offer will in most cases not be any more specific than "it sounds better." And, what may be worse, not knowing how to justify such differences, many translators will stick to the linguistic structure of the original much more than necessary. Some will even consider any additional difference as illegitimate, and vehemently defend their

stylistically poor translation as the "correct" one, ignoring the fact that a stylistically inadequate translation will always do injustice to the original. However limited the stylistic quality of the original may have been, it cannot be blamed for the stylistic deficiencies brought into the translation by the differences between the stylistic rules of target and source language. Thus, if we want to raise the quality of translations and put an end to subjectivism in our views about how far the translation should or could deviate from the original, we need a theory of comparative stylistics, setting down all the language- specific instantiations of the universal principles that can be expected to determine the use of a language over and above its specific grammar. But those who are willing to participate in the elaboration of such a theory have to come to terms with the problem of subjectivity, too, as there has to be agreement on the reliability of the observational data they want to build their theory on.

1.2 The degree to which a theory can be taken seriously depends as much upon the acceptability of the empirical data it covers as on its consistency. Of the two criteria, observational adequacy seems to be the minor problem, especially if we think of consistency not only as a relation that holds between the various parts of a theory but also between these parts and those of other theories. But the reliability of the observational data is by no means guaranteed. And although theories which do not explain anything worth explaining may be the greatest nuisance, theories which are suspected to proceed from the wrong data could be dismissed as hopeless right away.

Theories of languages are built on observational data taken from the use of language and for quite a lot of people recorded data seem to be sufficiently objective. Especially printed matter seems to have a magic of its own, transferred to it from what we believe to be authorities by profession, *viz*, authors, editors, publishers, and the like. For certain aspects of language use they ought to be most competent and some of their competence will certainly carry over to the printed material. But even if we ignore the fact that printed material is, as a rule, restricted to certain registers, there is an essential difference between the answers we can expect from a competent speaker and those we can expect from a printed text.

A text can at best tell us which words or structures we can use in a language, it cannot tell us which we cannot use.

Although a native speaker will hardly ever become aware of it, any foreign student of the language could tell him how crucial the question of limits can be. Looking for the universal parameters whose values are set differently in different languages, the modern linguist could not hope for an answer to any relevant question if he restricted himself to printed material alone. Any rule we want to establish has to draw a line between what is and what is not possible and although we have to put up with a great deal of fuzziness in many cases, the fact that we can assess, produce and interpret any sentence from the language we know suggests that we do follow certain rules, whether we can name them or not. Tracking down the rules of a language, the linguist can therefore turn from the recorded product of competence to the competent speaker himself, who can produce, interpret or assess any sentence the linguist may consider relevant for his set of empirical data. To make up for the idiosyncrasies of individual speakers, he will, if in doubt, ask as many speakers as he thinks necessary to get his facts straight. If he asks different speakers of the same register about the grammatical acceptability of a sentence, he can always expect a certain degree of agreement, varying according to the subtleties of the problem he tackles. As judgements about meanings are often more intricate than grammatical judgements, there may be less agreement on semantic questions. Still more problematic will be stylistic questions. Linguists prefer to avoid them. But if we concentrate on specific issues, our stylistic competence turns out to be remarkably stable and differentiated and by no means less reliable than our grammatical competence. The only difficulty is that in grammar we are used to bright colours, since violations of grammatical rules are mostly real clashes; style is more a matter of finely graded hues and a lot of differences in stylistic quality will be discovered only by the patient observer.

If linguists tend to consider stylistic questions a fishy issue, they can get away with it because none of their essential questions has to take account of stylistic matters. Should there be any interdependency between the grammar of a language and the "style" of a language, they can afford to ignore it as it is not very likely that the grammatical properties of a language depend upon its stylistic properties. But it may well be that the stylistic properties depend upon grammatical ones as it is very unlikely that the stylistic properties of a language should exist in isolation. And if the stylistic properties of a language were to reflect the grammatical properties, stylistic questions could be rewarding for linguists, too, as the answers to a stylistic question might present additional

evidence for or against a certain grammatical hypothesis. For a theory of comparative stylistics, the relation between grammar and style is yet more important. It is clear that the reliability of the empirical data will be strengthened considerably wherever we can put our finger on an interdependency between a stylistic and a grammatical property of the language.

1.3 One of the most promising approaches to the specific stylistic properties of a language is the comparison of different translation versions. Instead of assessing the stylistic quality of a translation directly, we will compare a set of different versions and choose the translation we can consider the best one. All versions should meet the minimum requirement of target language adequacy: they should be grammatically acceptable. But except for the differences we have to put up with in the interest of grammaticality, we should start off with translations which are formally as analogous to the original as possible.[1]

The criterion of formal analogy between the original and its translation is a criterion which prevents us from deviating from the linguistic structures of the original more than necessary, i.e., from taking too much liberty with the original. This may come as a surprise as it is the criterion of equivalence which is traditionally supposed to guarantee a faithful translation. But there has always been some uncertainty about the interpretation of that criterion, due to the fact that many of the unavoidable differences between the linguistic forms of the original and the translation are associated with different meanings. Equivalence, at least in the sense of "surface-equivalence" between the explicitly expressed content of the original and the translation, is hardly ever possible. But if equivalence is defined in a wider sense, including all implications

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1. While the requirements of equivalence and grammaticality are not disputed anywhere, the call for formal analogy between the original and its translation may be rejected as unrealistic and superfluous right away. But together with equivalence, analogy is the yardstick for any comparison between languages, and as the translational maxim "Eine Übersetzung sollte den Inhalt des Originals bei weitestgehender Analogie der sprachlichen Mittel ohne Verstösse gegen die Regeln der Zielzprache wiedergeben" has met with a lot of scepticism in this respect, it will be given a "second reading" here. (As to its first reading, cf. M. Doherty, "Wie begründet man eine Übersetzungsvariante?" in *Fremdsprachen* 3, 1985.)

of the original and the translation — also the extralinguistically determined ones — any redistribution of explicitly and implicitly determined contents, i.e., any paraphrase imaginable, could qualify as a translation. That is, if we rejected the criterion of analogy and did not consider the linguistic forms of the original binding as much as this is possible between different languages, it should not make any difference whether we translated a word like "wonder drugs" into German more analogously as "Wundermittel", or extended it into something like "Hilfsmittel mit Wunderkraft". No doubt, everybody would opt for the more analogous form and think of the paraphrase only if nothing more analogous were available. We would thus, intuitively, superimpose the criterion of analogy upon the criterion of equivalence.

1.4 Due to the many grammatical differences between different languages no one can expect too much formal analogy between the original and its translation. Still, the number of possible analogous forms: word classes, parts of speech, grammatical categories, word order, structural explicitness, sentence boundaries, etc., can be quite impressive — at least between closely related languages like English and German. But there are clearly many cases where analogy means grammatically unacceptable forms in the target language, i.e., forms which have to be replaced in the translation by other, grammatically acceptable forms. Whenever this happens, we lose our foothold in the linguistic form of the original and find ourselves confronted with quite a lot of different linguistic forms in the target language, all of which could serve as substitutes for the grammatically unacceptable analogous form. It is this choice between many alternative forms which promotes the prejudice that there are many good translations possible for each original. However, if target-language adequacy is to include stylistic adequacy in addition to grammatical acceptability, there will be only very few good translations of an original.[2] Restricting the possibility of

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2.   If we assume that grammatical and stylistic adequacy are properties of the original, target language adequacy could even be required in the interest of equivalence. However, including grammatical and stylistic adequacy into the criterion of equivalence tends to make the translational maxim circular as we would then have to give up a certain degree of equivalence in the interest of a higher degree of equivalence. To avoid the contradiction, we could of course distinguish between different types of equivalence. But such a distinction would require us to bring in

analogous translation also by stylistic considerations, we find ourselves in the paradoxical situation that we have to screen ever more alternative options from the whole set of widely equivalent versions, with ever fewer versions qualifying as good translations.

We have to rely on our inner computer to come up with acceptable results, though a better understanding of what it is that makes us prefer one linguistic form over another in a certain context might be helpful. In other words, we could proceed more efficiently if we knew more about the stylistic rules distinguishing source and target language texts. But as these rules are the very goal of our comparative studies, we cannot but content ourselves with a step-by-step procedure, taking up one issue at a time. It should go without saying that this is a method of research and not a method of translating; no translator could ever hope to spend so much time on stylistic considerations. But research can be rationalized, too, by concentrating on issues, as e.g. the question of redundancy, which could be expected to belong to one specific stylistic domain.

2.1   Some texts may contain more redundancies than others and the proportion found in the original will have to be retained in the translation. But between an original and its translation the question of redundancy arises in yet another way, which cannot be blamed on the author of the original, and which need not be retained in the translation. Typical examples of such redundancies are to be found among the translations of English non-finite verb phrases into German. As certain types of non-finite verb phrases are not available in German, they have to be replaced by other structures, which will either extend the verb phrase into a clause or reduce it into a phrase, e.g. a prepositional phrase, ranking lower in the hierarchy of constituent structure. Nobody would hesitate to reduce a phrase like "diseases ranging from cancer to the common cold" to "Krankheiten von ... bis"; being acceptable in German only under special conditions, the postnominal participle phrase would be out anyway: "Krankheiten reichend von ... bis ... reichende Krankheiten" would be rejected, too — mainly because the participle is felt to be redundant. The example looks rather trivial, all the more so as equivalence does not really seem to be at stake. The translation is still very close to surface-equivalence because the relation speci-

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adequacy through the back door, which looks very much like an unnecessary detour.

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fied by "ranging" is obviously implied by the preposition. But if we think about it for some more time, the case turns out to be quite puzzling, after all. Redundancy, it seems, should be a universal criterion, exclusively determined by the informational relevance of an element in a certain context. That is, if the information of "ranging" is considered redundant in German, why should it not be considered redundant in English, too? If the translation is to be stylistically preferred without the participle, why does the original use it?

Everyone translating from English into German knows that the example is by no means a unique case, but that there are many similar structures with participles or other non-finite verb forms. As the use of non-finite verbs is, in general, more restricted in German, they are candidates for non-analogous translation in very many cases, and as non-finite English structures are often extended into finite structures in German, we have come to think of participles, gerunds and infinitives as typical means of reduction in English. To discover their capacity for redundancy may thus come as a surprise — even more so as the advantage of reductive devices is self-evident whereas redundant elements are by definition superfluous. As it would make little sense to think of any language as being more redundant than another language, we can only conclude that there must be special conditions in each language making us prefer a greater degree of structural explicitness over a lower degree in one place and vice versa in another place. But what are these conditions?[3]

2.2 Redundancy can be considered a disproportion between the degree of explicitness and the informational relevance of the message. Its language-specific conditions are part of what linguistics have termed the "information structure" of sentences, which is

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3. As it were, there are quite a lot of people who nurture the prejudice that German is more fond of redundancy than English. And it is certainly true that German translations are normally longer than their English originals, but this is mainly due to differences in morphology — English uses many more short words and hardly any inflections. Syntactic structures reveal specific types of redundancies in both languages. For a discussion of "redundant" text connectors in German and "redundant" clause structures in English see M. Doherty, Conventionalized redundancies, in *Fremdsprachen* forthcoming.

associated with concepts like "theme" and "rheme", "focus" and "background" and other aspects ("functional sentence perspective", "communicative dynamism") of the hierarchy constituted by the informational elements of a sentence or text. Information structure is a property of the syntactic level associated with corresponding aspects of the semantic and the phonological levels. If we restrict ourselves to written texts we can ignore the phonological side — which should, however, not prevent us from reading aloud to benefit from our "ear's wit" as much as we can.[4]

If we take the focus of a sentence to be its informationally most relevant element, it will normally be placed at the end of a German sentence, that is close to the basic position of the German verb.[5] We say that German is an endfocus language. Although English is generally assumed to be an endfocus language, too, there are many counter examples pointing to a close relation between the focus and the position of the English verb in the middle of a sentence. The difference between the German and the English focus positions becomes more visible in sentences with more than one complement to the verb, including complex sentences. Translators, who have to deal with complex sentences more often than with simple ones, will come across many such cases suggesting that English is a midfocus language.[6]

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4.   Extraordinary intonation goes with extraordinary word order and may thus be felt to legitimize it, but in a written text, the extraordinary cases have to be figured out without any support from intonational contours, stress and the like. Except for the short and clear cases, extraordinary word order is more demanding than normal word order and if our inner computer has to re-run its interpreting program too often, we will eventually lose interest in what the author has to tell us.

5.   The second place for the finite verb in German main clauses and independent sentences may seem to be more basic than the final position in subclauses, but all complements to the German verb face to the right in all types of clauses, suggesting that it is to the right that the verb has its basic position in German.

6.   A variety of different cases is presented in M. Doherty, Focus Hierarchies, Acta Linguistica, Budapest, forthcoming.

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The fact that German expects the most relevant element at the end, where English expects something less relevant, may come to light in shorter structures, too. Thus the order of the diseases mentioned above, "from cancer to the common cold" would simply be inadequate in German. The minor disease must be mentioned before the deadly one: "vom gewöhnlichen Schnupfen bis zu Krebs". The analogous order "von Krebs bis zum gewöhnlichen Schnupfen" is felt to present the world upside down — though everybody would have to concede that the phrase is grammatically acceptable.[7] The analogous version is rejected for stylistic reasons concerning the difference between the informationally adequate order of constituents in German and English, in particular the informationally adequate position of the most relevant element. But the fact that this difference can be traced back to the difference between the German and English verb positions suggests that the stylistic judgement about the informationally adequate order has its roots in a basic grammatical difference between the two languages.

2.3 The difference between the focus positions in German and English may shed some new light on our stylistic judgement about redundancy, too. As can be seen from its preceding context (compare the quotation below), the informational relevance of "diseases" is much lower than that of the specific diseases mentioned in the attribute. If we were to use a participle in the German translation, it would require the attribute to be used in a prenominal position, which, in turn, would place "Krankheiten" — the element of the lowest informational relevance — in final position, i.e., in the position reserved for the element with the highest informational relevance. If we drop the participle and reduce the attribute to a prepositional phrase, we can use this phrase postnominally and place the most relevant element in the position reserved for it.

Can we then, perhaps, say that our feeling of redundancy is induced by the informationally inadequate position of the prenominal participle phrase in the German translation? As the postnominal participle phrase is grammatically unacceptable, the impact of the positional deficiency cannot be assessed directly. But a

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7.   The analogous translation suggests that the common cold is more difficult to cure than cancer, which can only be accepted as an ironical statement.

more explicit form of the postnominal attribute, a relative clause, would be grammatically acceptable: "Krankheiten, die vom gewöhnlichen Schnupfen bis zu Krebs reichen". The individual elements are now placed in their informationally adequate positions, with the most relevant at the end, or at least right before the verb there. But the translation is still stylistically inadequate. Redundancy is clearly an issue in its own right.

2.4   Although redundancy cannot be subsumed under the question of adequate word order, there is certainly an interrelation between an adequate degree of structural explicitness and an adequate word order. A structure which may be considered redundant in one place may be just the right thing in another place. The sentence from which the phrase referring to the diseases has been taken provides an interesting example of the alternative case. As it is the introductory sentence from a text on interferon, the stylistic quality of the translation can be assessed without recourse to any preceding context.

> In the late 1970s interferons were hailed as "wonder drugs" with the potential to cure diseases ranging from cancer to the common cold.

A structurally analogous translation of the attribute to "wonder drugs" is not possible for grammatical resp. lexical reasons as the German word for the head noun, "Wundermittel" cannot be combined with an analogous translation of the "potential to cure sth.": "Wundermittel mit dem Potential Krankheiten zu heilen". But we could incorporate the nonfinite complement into a contextually equivalent compound and reduce this part of the attribute to "Heilkraft", which is what Wundermittel could be said to have. To integrate the compound into the remaining structure we need one more modification as "Heilkraft für Krankheiten" would be considered a tautology. We can only speak of "Heilkraft für verschiedene Krankheiten" or the like — a trivial matter, as the text goes on to mention the difference anyway. Still, the resulting version is not yet really satisfying:

> Ende der 70er Jahre wurden Interferone als "Wundermittel" mit einer Heilkraft für die verschiedensten Krankheiten, vom gewöhnlichen Schnupfen bis zu Krebs, gepriesen.

It would be a bit better if we moved the non-finite verb somewhat up:

> Ende der 70er Jahre wurden Interferone als "Wundermittel" gepriesen mit einer Heilkraft für die verschiedensten Krankheiten, vom gewöhnlichen Schnupfen bis zu Krebs.

But even this solution may be felt to be stylistically inadequate and the reason could well be that the entire attribute up to "diseases" does not introduce anything new, but spells out what is associated with the meaning of "wonder drugs" anyway, *viz* that they are efficient means to cure diseases. Thus, we could try to drop some of the redundant elements from the translation:

> Ende der 70er Jahre wurden Interferone als "Wundermittel" gepriesen gegen die verschiedensten Krankheiten, vom gewöhnlichen Schnupfen bis zu Krebs.

Now, this version is clearly better than the preceding ones and only perfectionists could still nurture some reservations against it. For example against the position of the verb which results from the extraposition of the attribute. But the verb after the attribute would only make things worse:

> Ende der 70er Jahre wurden Interferone als "Wundermittel" gegen die verschiedensten Krankheiten, vom gewöhnlichen Schnupfen bis zu Krebs, gepriesen.

Nor would the verb be any better before the apposition:

> Ende der 70er Jahre wurden Interferone als "Wundermittel" gegen die verschiedensten Krankheiten gepriesen, vom gewöhnlichen Schnupfen bis zu Krebs.

In fact, the apposition seems to be the source of the problem; without it the verb would be perfect in end position:

> Ende der 70er Jahre wurden Interferone als "Wundermittel" gegen die verschiedensten Krankheiten gepriesen.

The crucial role of the apposition suggests that what we have got here is simply too much information squeezed into too little space. In other words, the structural explicitness of the attribute is too low and a structurally more explicit translation ought to be stylistically better. And indeed, using a relative clause

instead of the prepositional phrase, the translation sounds much better balanced:

> Ende der 70er Jahre wurden Interferone als "Wundermittel" gepriesen, mit denen man die verschiedensten Krankheiten, vom gewöhnlichen Schnupfen bis zu Krebs, heilen könne.

2.5 The example suggests that the verb-end condition in German restricts the amount of information that can be placed before the verb or extraposed behind it. Since the English verb comes in the middle of the sentence, this stylistic restriction will not arise in English. The verb which precedes its complement creates different conditions for the question of structural explicitness than the verb which follows its complements. The verb-end/end-focus structure could be considered a closed information structure, while the mid-verb/midfocus structure will be an open-ended information structure. Whereas a closed information structure makes us prefer a clause structure to avoid the squeeze-in effect, the open-end condition will make us prefer a tighter structure, a phrase structure, after the focus so as not to lose sight of the focus on the way to the end of the sentence. We can now predict that a retranslation of the German relative clause like

> In the late 1970s interferons were hailed as "wonder drugs", with which one could cure diseases ranging from cancer to the common cold.

will be stylistically deficient because it separates "wonder drugs" from their effect on cancer and the common cold by too much structure. Due to its degree of structural explicitness the relative clause ought to be felt redundant in this position.

To free the English structure of all redundant elements, *viz* of all the elements which are already implied by the reference to wonder drugs, would not be stylistically adequate, either. A structurally analogous version to the shortest German version would be felt to be too short in English, too:

> In the late 1970s interferons were hailed as "wonder drugs" against diseases ranging from cancer to the common cold.

Under the condition of midfocus, the informational hierarchy is expected to decrease after the focus on "wonder drugs" and the next focus on "cancer" will take us by surprise if nothing in the structure in between signals its coming. Clearly, the redundant

non-finite structure of the original, "to cure", linked to "wonder drugs" by the dummy noun "a potential" serves this purpose.

3. Let us summarize our findings. Assessing the stylistic qualities of grammatically acceptable translations into German and retranslations into English, we concentrated on the question of the adequate degree of structural explicitness. Inadequacy arose if the structure was too explicit, when it was assessed as redundant, or if the structure was not explicit enough, when it was felt to be too concise. Although these ought to be universal types of stylistic deficiencies, the conditions for them turned out to be language specific. They were shown to be related to other aspects of the information structure of sentences as e.g. the position of the most relevant element of the sentence, which in turn depends upon the position of the verb, i.e. upon one of the basic properties of the grammar of a language.

These claims are, of course, hypotheses and their probability depends heavily upon our readiness to accept the observational data they proceed from, *viz* the assessment of the grammatical acceptability and stylistic adequacy resp. inadequacy of the various structural versions of an English sentence and its German translation. One sentence, however many versions we may formulate of it, is definitely too small an empirical basis for any conclusion — even if all of us were willing to accept all the assessments. But if we accept the sentence as an example of many similar cases, our empirical data grow accordingly. Also, having been made aware of the phenomenon, we will now be able to discover it in other places and through any of its many structural disguises. Analysing the same or related phenomena consciously, we will develop a better understanding of the relation between the informational relevance of an element and the informational value associated with its linguistic form in a certain language. Working out the dependency between the stylistic and grammatical rules of a language in more detail will sharpen our intuition and reduce uncertainties in our assessment — at least as far as the natural fuzziness between adjoining phenomena allows it. In short, it will help us to enhance the reliability of our observational data, on the basis of which we could eventually develop a theory of comparative stylistics that might be of equal relevance to all people interested in the specific properties of languages that go beyond those of their grammatical systems.