COMMON DIFFICULTIES OBSERVED IN ABSTRACTS WRITTEN IN ENGLISH BY PEOPLE HAVING SPANISH AS MOTHER TONGUE

DIFICULTADES USUALES EN RESÚMENES ESCRITOS EN INGLÉS POR NATIVOS DE ESPAÑOL

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RESUMEN

Este artículo trata sobre la influencia de la lengua materna sobre los autores que traducen del español al inglés sus propios abstracts. Se analizaron ochenta resúmenes aprobados para aparecer en dos revistas científicas colombianas. Se analizó la coherencia y cohesión textual de los intentos de traducción realizados por los autores. Durante la corrección y re-traducción de dichos textos preliminares, se encontraron errores significativos que afectaban el verdadero significado de los abstracts. La investigación muestra que la lengua materna influye a través de transferencias erróneas sobre las traducciones no-profesionales. Para traducir al inglés el resumen original, los autores adoptan estructuras del español, sin considerar los retos ligados a lo sociocultural y al sentido del texto, retos impuestos por la traducción inversa.

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the influence of the mother tongue when translating abstracts from Spanish into English. 80 abstracts were analyzed published in 2 Colombian scientific magazines. Text coherence and cohesion were analyzed based on the translators´ attempts. During correction and drafting of those texts, relevant mistakes were found that affected the meaning of the content in the texts. In fact, this research shows how the mother tongue interferes through negative transfers in non- professional translations. When translation into English the content of the abstract, translators use Spanish structures without taking into account sociocultural aspects and text meaning, challenges faced by the so- called inverse translation.

RESUMÉÉ

Cet article traite de l'influence de la langue maternelle chez les auteurs qui traduisent leurs propres textes de l'Espagnol vers l'Anglais. Quatre-vingt résumés, dont la parution fut approuvée dans deux revues scientifiques colombiennes, on été analysés. La cohérence et l'évaluation textuelle du risque de traduction effectué par les auteurs ont été analysées. Lors de la correction et de la retraduction de ces textes préliminaires, des erreurs significatives, qui affectaient la véritable signification des résumes, ont été retrouvés. La recherche montre que la langue maternelle influence, à travers des transferts erronés, les traductions non-professionnelles. Pour traduire le texte original à l'Anglais, les auteurs utilisent des structures de l'Espagnol, sans considérer les défis liés au socioculturel et au sens du texte, défis qui sont imposés par la traduction inverse.

1. INTRODUCCIÓN

As specialized Colombian publications have become interested in acquiring greater visibility internationally, writing article abstracts in English has become a common requirement for authors. Journals or science magazines usually require that article abstracts be written in two languages, the most common combination being Spanish-English; however, options like Portuguese-Spanish and French-Spanish, to a lesser extent, are also found in publications done by Publindex. Authors usually try to put the ideas of their original abstracts into English by themselves, but difficulties become clearly evident as the influence of the mother tongue negatively affects the true meaning of the translated abstract. When the rules of Spanish grammatical structure and a socio-cultural approach unique to Spanish are applied in the construction of sentences in English, the resulting discourse becomes forced, unnatural and confusing.

If authors do not possess sufficient knowledge about the foreign language, their work may be constrained by limited vocabulary, invented or incorrect word usage and though the sentences may have correct grammatical structure, they are poorly expressed and communicated. In our country, it is uncommon for people to hire the services of a translator to correct abstracts or translate them to English; however, some publications do use professional services to correct and write full abstracts. If there is no mechanism in place to control the abstracts' language quality and preciseness, the impact that an article is intended to have on the international community may be seriously affected, resulting in damage rather than benefits for the authors and their publications.

This article is based on the analysis of eighty abstracts corresponding to articles which will be published in two on-line Colombian scientific journals. The topics covered by the analyzed abstracts are mainly related to the social sciences (Education, Psychology, Sociology, etc.) and engineering (Informatics, Electronics, etc.). The analysis carried out is mostly centered on the influence exerted by the mother tongue on these articles (Casado, 2005). The above mentioned influence commonly results in erroneous language transfers as authors use Spanish language structures when they try to translate the original abstract text to English, but do not consider socio-cultural issues and a meaning-based approach to translation. Some of the most frequent mistakes which are made by authors when translating are also described as well as contemplation on the issues affecting native speakers of Spanish when completing research projects.

2. METHODOLOGY

The following methodologies were utilized in the compilation of this article:

• Reading of the original abstracts and keywords in Spanish (Resumen y palabras clave) and their English version as proposed by the author

• Correction/re-translation of the rough translations

• Article classification (Social sciences-Engineering)

• Error categorization

2.1 Analysis Overview

Based on the faults found while correcting or re-translating the abstracts written in English, which were provided by the editors of the two online scientific publications, some recurring errors have been selected to illustrate how the Mother Tongue may negatively impact and result in incorrect translation procedures. . Some examples of errors mainly related to word form (orthographically-related), sentence form (syntactically-related) and word/sentence meaning (semantics) are shown, Alonso (1997).

2.1.1 Orthographically Related Errors

In this category, we address errors related to poor knowledge of the target language or a lack of strictness in the use of spelling. This error can be easily corrected by simply using a dictionary, glossaries and consulting termbases. Due to the nature of the solutions, these errors are not considered to be a serious problem for the writer.

2.1.2 Semantically Related Errors

Many problems in this error category are related to incorrect approaches to translation which may be the result of faulty translation procedures, such as literal translation or word-by-word translation. Direct or literal translation has widely proven to be unsuitable in solving language situations that do not meet this word-equivalence strategy. Problems in language transfer become quite evident at this point when authors decide to apply the same rules of grammatical structures to sentences in both English and Spanish. More often than not, the resulting text is unnatural and bizarre , exhibiting serious faults in terms of the general meaning. The misconceptions about the structure of written English and little or no knowledge on word meaning lead to poor communicative effects in the target language and disparities in the discourse level of formality, mixing colloquial with scientific terms. In some cases, the adoption of cognates as word equivalents in the target language alters the meaning of the text, transforming the resulting abstract into an erroneous text.

2.1.3 Syntactically Related Errors

Incorrect word order in phrases or clauses is an error which was less recurrent in the analyzed abstracts. Usually, this kind of error indicates a lack of knowledge of basic English grammar.

3. RESULTS

The tables below show some examples of errors found, belonging   to the abovementioned error categories.

Table I. Two examples of orthographically-related errors found during the abstracts' analysis		
Orthographically Related Errors (Examples)		
Words as they appeared on the "resumen" provided by the author (abstract's source text, in Spanish)	Translated text (abstract version provided by the author in English)	Comments
Sistematización de los datos	Data systemation	Systematization (word compression)
Análisis documental	Documental analyses	Analysis (word misspelling)

Table II. Examples of semantically-related errors found. These types of faults considerably affect the meaning of translated texts		
Semantically Related Errors (Examples)		
Words as they appeared on the "resumen" provided by the author (abstract's source text, in Spanish)	Translated text (abstract version provided by the author in English)	Comments
De igual manera	Of equal way	In the same way (collocation)
Los principales aspectos legales	Principal legal aspects	Principal instead of main (major), cognate misusage
Derechos de autor	Rights of author	Word-by-word translation using Spanish language structure
Programas de retención estudiantil (i.e para evitar la deserción estudiantil)	Retention program	Meaning is unclear. Erroneous use of cognate.
A la luz de las teorías	In the light of theories	An attempt at translating by applying Spanish language structure. A translation attempt keeping Spanish language structure is made

Table III. Two examples of syntactically-related errors found. The interference of mother tongue interference becomes evident		
Syntactically Related Errors (Examples)		
Words as they appeared on the "resumen" provided by the author (abstract's source text, in Spanish)	Translated text (abstract version provided by the author in English)	Comments
Sistema educativo universitario	educational system university.	Noun and adjective order are incorrectly used.
Conocimiento fuente	Knowledge source	Noun and adjective order are incorrectly used

The Fig.1 shows the "big picture" of the errors found during the analysis of the abstracts' rough translations. Orthographically related errors correspond to about 15%. Semantically related errors covered 55% and the remaining 30% corresponded to syntactically related errors. The percentages shown are estimated as it is possible that some errors might not be included in the total count.

Fig.1. Errors found belonging to the three categories as percentage
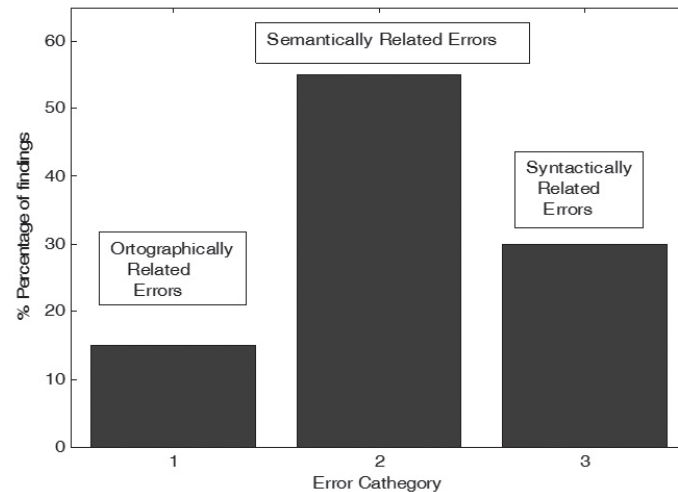
4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Mother Tongue Interference

Mother tongue interference over people when writing in English is a well-known phenomenon that has been analyzed from different points of view, (Bhela, 1999; Alonso, 1997). When there is no conscious knowledge on key differences between languages, grammatical differences for example, writers are prone to erroneously use words and sentences. Usually this is highly influenced by their mother tongue. Specifically, when "reverse-translating" from Spanish to English, some authors of abstracts intuitively adapt the source text to the target language, supported on their own knowledge, without considering the risk of non-efficient meaning transfer because of erroneous procedures (Kavaliauskiene, 2009). At most, translations done in this way are based on linguistic elements related to language form, like grammar-related areas, but the meaning and context aspects, like those related to semantics and sociolinguistics, are not considered or are poorly addressed.

Language Transfer appears when writers consciously or unconsciously appeal to mother tongue structures, words,

discourse elements, etc., looking for safety and searching not following into inaccuracy, vagueness or meaning imprecision. However this procedure has the opposite effect because the results are contrary to the author's intention (Camilleri, 2004).

4.2 Specialized Texts: Word Use and Formality Level Issues

Jargon or specialized lexicon is a very important aspect when talking about abstracts. Major attention is needed because of the specific communicative purposes of scientific texts. This particular genre or text type is basically intended to reach readers having knowledge in the covered research areas , as such the correct words must be used in order to provide precise information and to express the real importance of the work carried out. (Montalt, Ezpeleta & García, 2008). If the Spanish abstract exhibits proper language level but the English version of the text is vague, providing poor or erroneous information, the diffusion task intended could become obstructed and the foreign language target audience will not receive the real

message. Additionally, authors can be misunderstood and their work may not be considered serious enough because of the low quality of the translation.

Word use and choice is fundamental to perform correct meaning translation. Highly polysemous words constitute a common error source because native speakers of Spanish commonly misinterpret word meaning when writing texts in foreign languages by using words that do not connote the same   meaning as that used in the original text. This results in texts with lower quality thus negatively affecting the scientific trait of the writings (Carrió-Pastor, 2009). The wrong choice of words turns abstracts into texts with colloquial nuances, prone to be considered as less-serious work.

Authors also use discourse resources in Spanish to make their abstracts clearer and more pleasant. Sayings or collocations used as stylistic resources in source texts, when incorrectly translated, do not contribute to text coherence despite being correct from a cohesive point of view at the target text. At this level, it is very important to note that it is required perform translating tasks carefully, so as to bring together meanings and stylistic resources in the target language in a successful manner. The original intention of adding fluency to abstracts written in Spanish can result in serious damage in terms of the abstracts'overall communicative effect. The wrong decision in the choice of words to repeat the stylistic resource in another language can result in bizarre texts and forced discourse, Aixelá (2009).

4.3 Socio-cultural Knowledge: A Valuable Toolbox When Translating

Many translation studies point toward the need forknowledge on the target language's socio-cultural issues (Gerzymisch, 2007; Nord, 2006). The socio-cultural gap between the source-language's context and the foreign-language reality becomes evident when it is needed to establish parallel references. A common error related to the above mentioned items is to establish direct correspondences between institutions belonging to different countries. This can be illustrated with an example based on a finding made in an abstract dealing with education topics. When talking about the education system of a country, it is not possible to make direct equivalences because not necessarily there is a full correspondence. There are marked differences between the Colombian education system and its foreign counterparts. If an author does not take this into consideration, his discourse can be deeply misunderstood. In this case, if a term is intended to be read by native speakers of English, the writer must take in account the differences between education systems and degrees. Furthermore, it is necessary to mediate with the difference for English speakers (e.g in America and Europe), and try to adopt common referents clear enough to cover the original meaning (Lekova, 2009). Some abstracts provided by authors deal with educational topics, pedagogical trends, and other related issues, and writers made translations based on direct equivalences for high school and higher education, while this is not always possible and, as is this case, may lead to confusion and loss of meaning.

4.4 Language Competences: Mother Tongue and Foreign language

The authors of some articles, despite having been educated in English as a second language, show high deficiencies when writing abstracts because their education in languages has been mostly centered on traditional aspects of linguistics and their derived disciplines which, though important, do not contribute to the improvement of translation competences. When studying languages people are mostly concerned about orthographical issues, grammatical correctness, and syntactical issues but are not sufficiently aware of crucial aspects like cultural equivalence or language transfer influences. Knowledge in these areas will allow them to deal with the real meaning of the words, looking beyond the words itself, but centered on the communicative purposes.

A key issue that is often ignored , but is just as important as proficiency in the target language, is proficiency in the source language. Aspects such as the self conscience level about native language's grammar structure are very useful; through this, the writer can make proper use of syntactical resources in the native language, and also in the foreign language because language differences become more evident (Rodríguez and Oxbrow, 2008). It is not a natural fact that a person having little knowledge of their own language could develop skills in the use of other languages. Although native and foreign language structures are quite different, knowledge of these differences is very useful because abstract writers can distinguish between

the features of sentences in both languages and can make changes in order to use the word needed or sentence meaning in the target language (Valdeón, 1995).

4.5 Reverse Translation: Challenges and Real Facts

Some researchers think that translation from the mother tongue to a foreign language is not possible because of the lack of socio-cultural background required to express text meanings in another language. Usually, teaching translation is started working on text meanings to be transferred from the foreign to source language. People can take advantage of their own cultural heritage and this fact greatly favors the translation of the piece of work. Considering this, we can state that direct translation of abstract texts from Spanish to English by non-expert translators is a major risk for scientific publications because the likely result is a set of poorly translated texts which will represent a menace for the objectives of publications; to become visible and recognized for international community. Authors/Publishers must continue using professional translators who can support the publication of texts in foreign languages in order to face the challenges established by text specific features (García and Borja, 2008), in this way, abstracts can be clearly expressed in the desired target language.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

A common practice in our country is that people who have some knowledge about English as a foreign language feel confident enough to translate their original work without the help of a professional translator, because they believe that they possess the required competences to translate meanings to the target language. However, the analysis carried out and a plethora of studies on translation ,show that the mere basic proficiencies in the English language are not enough to face translation challenges stated by text aspects that yield outside the mere words, like context comparative analysis, intercultural issues, sociolinguistic approach, formality level analysis, discourse nuance, among others.
Translation is not only a matter of language-proficiency, as it involves comprehensive knowledge of linguistic and socio-cultural phenomena, which require studies in different science areas not only language-related, but socially and culturally related as well. Recently, an ICONTEC standard formalizing the translators' work in Colombia has been published. Translators and organizations must drive a change to raise consciousness about the importance of the use of professional language services when needed. Specialized work on important aspects like scientific abstract writing for foreign readers must be a priority for authors and specialized publications. Further research is needed on the topics that affect the quality of work being published in the English language by Colombian scientific journals. Pedagogical strategies currently used for teaching English as a foreign language at tertiary education institutions must be analyzed. Another crucial topic to be considered is the role of professional translators for the high-level globalization of Spanish-written academic and scientific production.

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