Syntactic complexity in literary translation over time

Zoë Miljanović, M.A., RWTH Aachen University

Using a diachronic, bi-directional parallel corpus containing narrative fiction of various genres published between 1750-1950 in the language pair English-German, this paper presents an investigation of syntactic complexity in literary translation over time. This phenomenon is interesting both from a diachronic as well as a translation perspective. On average, Biber and Conrad (2019) find longer sentences and more complex phrases in 18th century novels and reduced length and syntactic complexity on phrase and clause level in the 20th century. A decrease in sentence length is also observed in German in general from the middle of the 19th over the course of the 20th century (von Polenz 1999, 353). In translation, Bisiada (2013) finds that in business writing hypotactic relations between clauses decrease while parataxis increases over a period of 25 years, and that sentence-splitting is more likely than sentence-combining. Higher syntactic complexity of source texts has been found to result in a reduction of complexity in the target texts, for example through sentence-splitting, and especially of subordination, for literary texts and popular-scientific writing (García Izquierdo & Borillo 2000; Heilmann 2021). However, when complexity is reduced on one level, such as a lower number of clauses, it may increase on another, such as the number of clause elements (Heilmann 2021). In contrast, fiction has also shown different tendencies in translational English: Complexity at different levels, such as the number of clauses per sentence, co- and subordination and mean sentence length, increases (Laviosa 1998; Xu & Li 2021; Liu & Afzaal 2021).

In the corpus mentioned above, a decrease in sentence length over time was observed. At the same time, the translations in both languages generally contain longer sentences than the originals in the same period. This suggests that translations are more 'conservative' (cf. Even-Zohar 2000) than the contemporary target language originals or influenced by the earlier source texts, in that their sentences are 'still' longer while the sentences in the originals are 'already' shorter. Further, samples from the English and German originals and translations were analysed for grammatical intricacy, logical dependency and logico-semantic relation according to Systemic Functional Grammar. The overall indicator of grammatical intricacy, which helps assess the elaborateness of clauses (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014, 726), decreases over time in both the original and translated subcorpora in both languages, and the proportion of simplexes increases (cf. Bisiada 2013). Parataxis is the more frequently used dependency relation over time and in all varieties, in line with the observation that fiction is paratactic in its organisation, leaning toward spoken text (He 2019; Matthiessen 2002). Hypotaxis is used more frequently in the English than the German originals (cf. Bisiada 2013, 167), while the translations seem to be influenced by the source language with less or respectively more hypotaxis than the target language originals at the same time. The logico-semantic relation of projection

showed only small differences over time, whereas expansion decreases. Overall, clearer trends emerge along the temporal dimension, while a more varied picture can be observed when comparing the subcorpora of English and German originals and translations over time, though tendencies assimilate over time.

Taking into consideration complexity on levels below the clause, the analysis includes rank-shifted clauses as well as adjuncts, as there appears to be a cline from circumstances to cohesive sentences (Andersen & Holsting 2018, 12). Syntactic changes in clause elements have also been investigated for fiction in the 19th and 20th century, where phrase complexity decreased with regard to nominalisations and nominal group modification. Again, the language in the register of fiction is different from other registers in this regard (Biber & Gray 2011, 228-229). Including this rank below the clause addresses the observation that complexity may shift between ranks without suggesting a global tendency toward 'simpler' language (cf. Heilmann 2021). Distinctions within expansion and projection (see Table 1 for categories and examples) are included, and in particular clauses that combine with others to express the logico-semantic relation of enhancement as well as phrases realising circumstances in the experiential system are considered (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014).

			logical dependency	
			hypotactic	**paratactic**
logico-semantic relation	**projection**	**verbal**		*"Let us stay here," said she.* (ET)
		mental	*Then he remembered that during his years in England, he had heard strange stories* […] (EO)	
	expansion	**elaboration**	*The father went up to his daughter, who now awaked from her refreshing sleep.* (ET)	
		extension		[…] *he beat her and trampled upon her.* (ET)
		enhancement	*Mary's eyes looked rather red, as if she had been crying.* (EO)	

Table 1: Clause complexing relations with selected examples from English originals and translations

First results suggest that these meanings are expressed differently over time as well as in translation: Clause complexity in general and relations of expansion in particular decrease over time (cf. also He 2019), while the complexity of the source texts predicts changes in circumstantiation in the target texts, with slight differences between the translation directions. The paper focuses on these opposing tendencies of phrasal condensation versus clausal elaboration and their function with regard to the expression of circumstantial meanings over time and in translation in the register of fiction. Taking into account source and target text correspondences and changes through alignment allows insight into processes of sentence-splitting and sentence-combining or shifts from clauses to phrases and vice versa, which is relevant in terms of contrastive differences between English and German (cf. Neumann 2014, 2020). The parallel analysis also helps uncover translation properties, such as shining through (Teich 2003)

or explicitation (Hansen-Schirra et al. 2012). The interpretation of changes in syntactic complexity is not straightforward: For example, structurally complex constructions could be easier to process for the reader (including the translator as a reader) because they make meaning relations more explicit. 'Simplification' through an increase in parataxis could therefore come at the expense of semantic transparency (Bisiada 2013, 189; cf., however, Weber 2010, 375), if implicit logico-semantic relationships need to be inferred. This ambiguity may be especially relevant in a register that purposefully leaves meanings open for interpretation and that has almost spoken characteristics, like fiction.

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