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Functional Sentence Perspective in Translator Training

Thematic structure is an important component of the translation process and product, and it significantly affects the quality of translations, especially from English into Polish, the latter having more flexible word order and thus opening more syntactic possibilities. As pointed out by Hatim and Mason [1990: 216], “[v]ery often, vague feelings of dissatisfaction with a translation are ascribable to subtle shifts in the saliency and recoverability of information”. An especially useful tool that may help to address this issue is the theory of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) developed by the Prague School, which may enable trainee translators to base their decisions on more than mere intuition. Despite the fact that it is quite elaborate, it may be trimmed to fit more practically-oriented translation classes. Based on examples from student translations, this paper shows that such notions as communicative dynamism, context dependence/independence, competitors of the verb, setting vs. specification, Presentation Scale vs. Quality Scale, and potentiality can help trainee translators to correctly identify the hierarchy of carriers of communicative dynamism in their source texts and then make informed translation choices.

This paper draws on analyses of some translations done by students of the Institute of English Studies, Warsaw University, during classes in

practical translation. The first ST passage comes from a history book and concerns the German war criminal Arthur Greiser (throughout the paper, the portions of text relevant for the discussion are in bold type):

- (1) When he heard the name of his daughter's new employer, Danuta's father said to her, 'You are walking into the lion's den; who knows if you will leave it alive.' **Danuta had walked the 6 kilometres from her own home to the Greisers' house in tears.** Once there, she was put to work cleaning the house – to the 'German' standard: [...] [Rees, 2005: 128]

One student translated this excerpt in the following way:

- (2) Gdy ojciec Danuty usłyszał nazwisko nowego pracodawcy swojej córki, powiedział jej: „Wchodzisz w paszczę lwa; nie wiadomo, czy wyjdiesz stamtąd żywa”. **Danuta, zalana łzami, pokonała 6 kilometrów, które dzieliły jej dom od domu Greisera** [Danuta, in tears, walked the 6 kilometers which separated her home from Greiser's house.]. Na miejscu miała zająć się sprzątaniem według „niemieckich” standardów: [...]

The Polish translation of the sentence in bold is perfectly grammatical¹ but at the same time it sounds odd. This is because it is lacking in informativity, i.e. “the extent to which a presentation is new or unexpected for the readers” [de Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981: 139]. What is foregrounded in the ST sentence is that Danuta was in tears. Thus, it draws on a topic introduced in the previous sentence, which is about Danuta's father's misgivings about her new job. By speaking of tears, the author provides additional information on how Danuta reacted to her father's warning and her own plight. By contrast, the TT puts the emphasis on the distance covered. As it stands, this information bears little relation to the previous discourse, and as such is rather irrelevant. It might be pertinent, if, for instance, the distance was remarkably long. Then the sentence would throw into relief the hardships the woman had to undergo. Consider this made-up text:

¹ I will ignore any other deficiencies of the translations, focusing solely on their thematic structure.

- (3) Miała wysoką gorączkę, a jej stopy krwawiły. Mimo to nie poddała się. **Danuta, zalana łzami, pokonała 6 kilometrów, które dzieliły jej dom od domu Greisera.**

[She had a high fever and her feet were bleeding. Despite this, she did not give up. **Danuta, in tears, walked the 6 kilometers which separated her home from Greiser's house.**]

Here the sentence in bold is perfectly informative. It emphasizes the difficulty of covering the 6 kilometers on foot, which is relevant given that Danuta was in a bad way. Thus, the highlighted sentence in (3) contributes to the unfolding of the communication in a way in which it does not in (2).

In order to further explain the oddness of (2), it may be useful to invoke the notion of communicative dynamism (CD) put forward by Jan Firbas. For the Czech scholar, the “degree of CD carried by a sentence element” is the “extent to which the sentence element contributes to the development of the communication, to which, as it were, it ‘pushes’ the communication forward” [Firbas, 1966: 240]. Elements with the lowest degrees of CD are thematic, while those with the highest are rhematic. The element with the highest degree of CD (called the rheme proper) is the one toward which the communication is perspectived. It is always context-independent, i.e. it conveys information which is unknown to the reader/hearer “in regard to the immediately relevant communicative step to be taken” [Firbas, 1992: 22]. This means that Firbas defines context-independence or retrievability narrowly. Hence, if some information is shared by the interlocutors but is not present in the immediately relevant verbal or situational context, it is to be considered context-independent or irretrievable. For instance, in a conversation which opens with “Where’s John?”, John is context-independent even though both speakers know the person [Firbas, 1999: 15].

The distribution of degrees of CD over sentence elements is called Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) [Firbas, 1966: 241]. It can be considered the “contextual organization of the sentence” [Firbas, 1992: 224]. In written language, FSP is governed by an interplay of three factors, also called FSP means, which operate hierarchically: the contextual factor (retrievability/irretrievability), the semantic factor (“the impact that the semantic character of a linguistic element, as well as the character of its semantic relations, has on the distribution of the degrees of CD” [Firbas 1992: 41]) and linear modification. In spoken language, there is

the additional factor of intonation which is not independent of the other three means.

It should be pointed out that word orders in Polish and English are governed by two different principles. The dominant principle in Polish is the FSP linearity principle whereby elements in the sentence are arranged in accordance with their growing CD. English word order, by contrast, is governed by the grammatical principle whereby the position of an element in the sentence depends on its syntactic function [cf. Firbas, 1992: 118-123]. Thus, Polish word order is more susceptible to FSP, while English word order performs chiefly a grammatical function. Nevertheless, if not constrained by other FSP means (the contextual and semantic factors), linear modification can assert itself in both Polish and English.

To go back to the student translation, the notions presented above could be helpful in explaining to students the reason for the lack of informativity in (2). Thus, in (1) the communication is perspectived toward *in tears*; this is the most communicatively dynamic element, i.e. the rheme proper. By contrast, (2) is perspectived toward *6 kilometrów, które dzieliły jej dom od domu Greisera*, which, however, is a poor candidate for the rheme proper, since it will not push the communication forward for the reasons described above. In either sentence, linear modification is not prevented from asserting itself (to use Firbas' expression) by the contextual or the semantic factor and thus it highlights the most prominent element. In other words, the actual linear arrangement of both sentences coincides with their interpretative arrangement. Thus, it is crucial whether *in tears* and *zalaną łzami* are placed close to sentence-initial or in sentence-final position. This shows that student translators should not be just taught that they can manipulate the content of the ST freely as long as all the information is included in the TT; what they also need to be told is that attention must be paid to how the information is structured in terms of FSP. In (2), the translator failed to properly identify the distribution of CD and to put the most communicatively dynamic element last.

As regards the semantic factor, the verb "completes the development of the communication" only if it has no "successful competitor", i.e. an element which exceeds it in communicative dynamism [Firbas, 1992: 7]. A successful competitor of the verb is called a specification, and an unsuccessful one a setting. Let us consider the following sentences:

- (4) She sang.

- (5) She sang a song.
- (6) She sang it.

In (4) the verb has no competitor and constitutes the high point of the sentence, i.e. serves as the rheme proper; in (5), *a song* is a successful competitor, i.e. a specification; in (6) *it*, being context-dependent, cannot exceed the verb in CD and thus functions as a setting.

As Firbas [1992: 5] points out, the purpose of a sentence/clause is either to present a phenomenon or ascribe a quality to it (quality understood in a wide sense, e.g. an action or state). Hence, two perspectives can be distinguished: the presentative orientation and the quality orientation. For instance,

- (7) A boy came into the room.

displays the presentative perspective, since the purpose of the sentence is to signal the appearance on the scene of a boy; by contrast,

- (8) The boy came into the room

displays the quality orientation since it attributes a quality (*came*) to the boy. It is not the verb, however, that the sentence is perspectived towards, but the specification *into the room*, which acts as a successful competitor of the verb and exceeds it in CD.

The presentative perspective and the quality perspective yield the Presentation Scale and the Quality Scale, respectively [Firbas, 1992: 66]. These consist of the following elements (not all of them need to be implemented at the same time) arranged here in interpretative order, i.e. from the least to the most communicatively dynamic:

- (9) Set(ting), Pr(esentation of Phenomenon), Ph(enomenon Presented).
A boy (Ph) came (Pr) into the room (Set).
- (10) Set(ting), B(earer of Quality), Q(uality), Sp(ecification), F(urther)
Sp(ecification).
The boy (B) came (Q) into the room (Sp).

Either scale is a combination of dynamic semantic functions, so called because, as Firbas [1992: 86-87] points out, a distinction must be made between two ways in which the semantic and the grammatical structure of a sentence may be considered, namely as de-contextualized (the static angle) or contextualized (the dynamic angle). Thus, a verb which performs

the dynamic semantic function of presenting a phenomenon (like *came* in (9)) does so irrespective of whether or not, statically speaking, it is a verb of appearance/existence on the scene. For instance, if *Peter* is context-independent in *Peter is calling*, then the sentence is perspectived toward the subject, i.e. toward a phenomenon to be presented (Ph), and *is calling* performs the dynamic semantic function of presenting a phenomenon (Pr), even though, statically speaking, it is not a verb of appearance/existence. Conversely, if *Peter* is context-dependent in *Peter came in*, the verb performs the dynamic semantic function of expressing a quality (Q), despite the fact that from the static point of view it is a verb of appearance/existence.

We are now in a position to bring together the notions of specification/setting as well as the two scales and apply them in the analysis of student translations:

- (11) Danuta (B) had walked (Q) the 6 kilometres from her own home to the Greisers' house (Sp) in tears (FSp).
- (12) Danuta (B), zalana łzami (Set), pokonała (Q) 6 kilometrów, które dzieliły jej dom od domu Greisera (Sp).

As can be seen, the different FSP of the TT sentence results from changing a further specification to a setting, i.e. a rhematic element to a thematic one. The same happens in the translation of another sentence from this text, but here, additionally, the Presentation Scale is replaced with the Quality Scale:

- (13) She remembers him as a 'powerfully built figure. He was a tall man, you could see (Pr) his arrogance, his conceit (Ph). [...] [Rees, 2005: 127]
- (14) [...] którego pamięta jako „wysoką, potężnie zbudowaną postać. Jego arogancja i zarozumialstwo (B) rzucały się w oczy (Q). [...]”

The ST clause implements the Presentation Scale as it is meant to signal the existence/appearance on the scene of Greiser's arrogance and conceit, while the TT clause realizes the Quality Scale, being perspectived towards the quality and away from the bearer of quality, which is by definition thematic. Interestingly, this shift in thematic structure could have been avoided if the translator had chosen to translate more literally and had kept the ST word order (e.g. *Widać było jego arogancję i zarozumialstwo*) as here again the order of the English clause conforms to FSP

requirements. Again, we can see that students should be made more aware of the role played by word order and the effects of changing it.

Needless to say, the fact that Polish word order is governed by the FSP linearity principle does not mean that each Polish sentence must conform to the unmarked theme-transition-rheme pattern. A sentence may begin with a rhematic element, in which case the emotive principle is operative whereby word order conveys the speaker's emotional attitude (and is marked). This is more typical of spoken language, where the stress is an additional help in establishing FSP. (Naturally, the stress will be placed on the initial rhematic element). One student translation of the Greiser text provides an example of how this principle asserts itself. Here is the continuation of (1):

- (15) 'You were not supposed to see a speck of dust. Carpet fringes had to be combed in straight lines. [...]' [Rees, 2005: 128]
- (16) „Ani jedna drobinka kurzu nie mogła zostać dostrzeżona. [...]"

Even though (16) departs from the default theme-transition-rheme arrangement, it is acceptable. (It would sound better, however, if the passive form were replaced with a different verb in the active voice, e.g. *Ani jedna drobinka kurzu nie mogła pozostać.*) However, the question arises of whether a marked word order should feature in a TT if it is absent from the ST.

So far we have dealt with sentences or clauses where FSP could be established unambiguously. However, there are cases in which more than one interpretation is possible of which element the communication is perspectived toward, a phenomenon called potentiality [Firbas, 1992: 108]. Potentiality occurs when it is possible for the communication to implement either the Presentation Scale or the Quality Scale and be perspectived toward the subject or the verb/specification, respectively. Alternatively, it may not be clear whether an element within the Quality Scale is a setting or a specification, as in:

- (17) [taking criminals out of circulation] didn't reduce reoffending once they were discharged, however, and Mr Howard's penal experiment failed to disprove one of his Tory predecessors' description of prisons as "colleges of crime". **Crime rates have been falling in the Western world**, in societies with falling prison populations just as much as those with rising ones. [Longley, 2010]

- (18) **W świecie zachodnim wskaźnik przestępczości maleje**, zarówno w społeczeństwach, gdzie liczba osadzonych spada, jak i w tych, gdzie rośnie.
- (19) **W świecie zachodnim wskaźnik przestępczości maleje** zarówno w społeczeństwach, gdzie liczba osadzonych spada, jak i w tych, gdzie rośnie.
- (20) **Wskaźnik przestępczości maleje w świecie zachodnim**, zarówno w społeczeństwach, gdzie liczba osadzonych spada, jak i w tych, gdzie rośnie.

As can be seen from the student translations provided, the underlined ST adverbial could be interpreted either as a setting (in (18) and (19)) or as a specification (in (20)). However, if the contextual factor is taken into account, it becomes rather clear that the phrase *in the Western world* is context-dependent by virtue of the fact that the text is about Britain and hence about the Western world. Thus the phrase is retrievable from the immediately relevant context. By contrast, *have been falling* is context-independent as it has not been mentioned in any way in the preceding discourse. The high point of the message is not that the fall has been observed in the Western world of all places, but that such a fall has indeed been occurring. It would be hard to make a case for *in the Western world* being a specification because this interpretation would require a contrastive reading and there is no item in the text that the phrase could be contrasted with (*in the Western world* as opposed to what part of the world?). This means that the FSP of (20) is different than that of the original. The same goes for (19) because the clause is perspectived away from the verb *maleje*, as there is no comma separating it from the following portion of text which becomes a (very long) specification.

As the above discussion shows, thematic structure does pose a problem for trainee translators. They may misread the FSP of the source text and not be familiar with the differences between the two languages in this respect. For this reason, translation training programs should pay special attention to these issues by incorporating some theoretical underpinnings of FSP theory. Especially helpful would be the notions of communicative dynamism, context dependence/independence, competitors of the verb, presentative vs. quality orientation, and potentiality. It seems that what Peter Fawcett says about taxonomies of translation shifts also applies to FSP in translation:

Rejecting translation theory on the grounds that ‘it’s just putting fancy names to what I do already’ is perfectly acceptable if translators are indeed ‘doing these things already’ and doing them well. But if not, then knowing the names and practising the techniques of translation, having a ‘science’ of translation to start with, may correct the deficiencies and the wrong intuitions, creating a liberating effect without being a constraint. The ‘art’ of translation comes from the accumulated experience of enriching and applying the ‘science’ of translation [Fawcett, 1997: 52].

By the same token, it appears that translation practice could and should benefit from the insights offered by research into FSP. As pointed out by Peter Newmark [2003: 237], a translator is someone who, while not being aware of FSP factors, “would in any event only account for them intuitively, rather than as a stage in his or her professional training”. Newmark goes on to say that FSP “is an instrument of linguistic analysis, of interpretation and if need be [...] of criticism of the translation of a serious literary text” [ibid.: 238]. Needless to say, it can and should also be used for analyzing less serious non-literary texts, and may be a great help in the training of translators.

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the need for raising translation students' awareness of issues related to the thematic structure of source and target texts. This is a problematic area which significantly affects the quality of translations, especially from English into Polish, the latter having more flexible word order and thus opening more syntactic possibilities. An especially useful tool that may help to address this issue is the theory of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) developed by the Prague School. Despite the fact that it is quite elaborate, it may be trimmed to fit more practically-oriented translation classes. Based on examples from student translations, the paper shows that such notions as communicative dynamism, context dependence/independence, competitors of the verb, setting vs. specification, Presentation Scale vs. Quality Scale, and potentiality can help trainee translators to correctly identify the hierarchy of carriers of communicative dynamism in their source texts and then make informed translation choices.

Key words: translator training, thematic structure, functional sentence perspective, communicative dynamism, word order

STRESZCZENIE

Funkcjonalna perspektywa zdania w kształceniu tłumaczy

W artykule zwrócono uwagę na potrzebę uwrażliwiania studentów uczących się przekładu na kwestie związane ze strukturą tematyczną tekstu źródłowego i docelowego. Kwestie te są źródłem problemów, które znacząco wpływają na jakość tłumaczeń, zwłaszcza z angielskiego na polski, który cechuje się większą swobodą szyku zdania, a przez to stwarza więcej możliwości różnych konstrukcji składniowych. Szczególnie pomocnym narzędziem może być w tym teoria funkcjonalnej struktury zdania rozwinięta przez Szkołę Praską. Mimo, że jest ona dość złożona, można ją dostosować do bardziej praktycznych zajęć tłumaczeniowych. W artykule ukazano, w oparciu o tłumaczenia studentów, że pojęcia takie jak

dynamizm komunikacyjny, zależność/niezależność kontekstowa (*context dependence/independence*), konkurenci czasownika (*competitors of the verb*), umiejscowienie/specyfikacja (*setting/specification*), skala prezentacyjna/jakościowa (*Presentation Scale/Quality Scale*) oraz potencjonalność (*potentiality*) mogą pomóc adeptom przekładu w prawidłowym rozpoznawaniu hierarchii nośników dynamizmu komunikacyjnego w tekstach źródłowych i dokonywaniu właściwych decyzji tłumaczeniowych.

Słowa kluczowe: kształcenie tłumaczy, struktura tematyczna, funkcjonalna perspektywa zdania, dynamizm komunikacyjny, szyk zdania