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Academic discourse in translation: Trainee translators' performance, experience and perception of rhetorical conventions



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ABSTRACT

In translation of academic discourse intended for publication, rhetorical conventions present specific challenges to the translator who is not a member of the academic discourse community. This paper addresses the issue of translation of rhetorical conventions in academic discourse from the perspective of translator training. The study uses translation task analysis, questionnaires and interviews to examine trainee translators' translation performance, their awareness and perception of academic rhetorical conventions, as well as their assumptions and experiences relating to the translation of academic discourse. The translation task analysis reveals issues related to the translation of rhetorical conventions. Questionnaire and interview data are used to explore potential reasons for these issues. The findings identify several pedagogical challenges that need to be addressed in translator training, including trainee translators' familiarity with the social and discursive practices of the academic community, and their awareness of rhetorical elements used in academic texts in the two languages.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades a considerable amount of research has been dedicated to the non-native English speaker scholar writing for publication in English (Ferguson, 2007; Flowerdew, 2000, 2001; Lillis & Curry, 2006; Moreno, Rey-Rocha, Burgess, López-Navarro, & Sachdev, 2012; Pérez-Llantada, Plo, Ferguson, & Gibson, 2011; Salager-Meyer, 2008; to list just a few). However, writing directly in English is not an achievable goal for the many researchers whose limited proficiency in that language means they have to resort to translation services: They draft their texts in their L1 and have them translated into English, often by professional translators. There are, of course, substantial differences between non-native English-speaking scholars drafting their texts in English on the one hand and the translator acting as a mediator of an academic text on the other hand. The translator is not normally a member of the academic discourse community in question; consequently, unlike the author, he or she is faced with problems concerning terminology, subject knowledge and rhetorical conventions.

While various studies have focused on translation of academic discourse (e.g., Bennett, 2007; Montgomery, 2009; Williams, 2005, 2007), there has been less research addressing this topic from a pedagogical perspective. Research in scientific and technical translator training has focused mainly on issues connected with terminology management and subject

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knowledge (see, for instance, López Rodríguez, Buendía Castro, & García Aragón, 2012; Sharkas, 2013); the issue of trainee translators' awareness of academic discourse conventions, however, has not received serious research attention.

The aim of this paper is to identify and explore the specific challenges arising from academic rhetorical conventions encountered by trainee translators. By combining multiple methods of data collection and analysis, the study examines trainee translators' assumptions and experiences relating to the mediation of academic discourse, their awareness and perception of academic rhetorical conventions, as well as their translation performance.

2. Translating rhetorical elements in academic discourse

The target text produced in translation of academic discourse is what House (2006) has called a “covert” translation, that is, “a translation which enjoys the status of an original source text in the target culture” (p. 347). This is particularly obvious with the more prestigious academic genres, for instance the research article (RA): A translated RA is generally not presented as a translation and consequently not perceived as one; in most cases the translator is not credited (cf. Franco Aixelá, 2004, p. 30) and the reader is not able to distinguish a translation from a text that has been drafted in the target language from the start. It may therefore appear that academic texts are rarely translated; yet as Bennett (2011, p. 189) points out in her discussion of translation of scientific and technical texts from and into English, “[t]he fact that English is the undisputed *lingua franca* in these fields means that a great deal of translational activity takes place to and from that language”. In a recent interview-based study of the attitudes and practices of Spanish academics with regard to English as the language of the international academic community, Pérez-Llantada et al. (2011) found that two of their ten interviewees reported using translation services. Considering the fact that English is the dominant language of international research publishing, it is obvious that translation into English constitutes an important part of translation activities; however, translation from English is not exceptional either, if we consider cases such as international medical journals with local language editions (cf. Williams, 2005) or translated RA abstracts published together with the original (cf. Perales-Escudero & Swales, 2011), whose corpus included translations both from and into English.

However, because translated RAs are rarely acknowledged as translations, it is relatively difficult to compile translational corpora for this genre. Consequently, corpus-based research into issues in translation of published academic discourse has so far been somewhat limited.¹ Among the corpus studies of translated academic writing, few have focused specifically on the issue of rhetorical conventions; yet, the results of those that have suggest that academic rhetoric is a challenging issue in translation, as they reveal that translated texts are considerably different from comparable target language originals. Thus Williams (2005) highlights several important rhetorical differences between translations of RAs from English into Spanish and comparable Spanish originals, attributing these differences to the differences between the Anglo-American and Spanish discourse styles. Similarly, Pisanski Peterlin (2008) shows differences in text organization between translated and original English RAs.

A possible reason for the deviations of translated texts from the rhetorical practices found in the target language texts is that even experienced translators of specialized texts may have a weak awareness of the rhetorical devices typical of published academic discourse. While it may be assumed that they are familiar with the discourse features of university writing assignments, their knowledge of the genres of scholarly publication, for instance the RA, is less certain. Considering the fact that socialization into scholarly publication is a long and complex process for novice researchers (cf. Duff, 2010, p. 185, for an overview of some of the studies dealing with this topic), and considering that translators in general do not undergo this process, translators' awareness of rhetorical strategies used in this type of writing cannot be taken for granted.

A review of the literature on mediation of academic discourse suggests that there may be another reason for the deviations of translated academic texts. Some studies suggest that mediators of academic texts may sometimes be reluctant to make changes beyond linguistic ones, such as grammatical or lexical changes. In an interview study examining the attitudes and experiences of proofreaders of student writing, Harwood, Austin, and Macaulay (2009, p. 14–15) report that most of their informants saw correcting grammar and spelling as unproblematic, but they tended to be more reluctant to intervene with the content, argumentation, structure or factual accuracy of student writing – although it must be noted that some of their informants also claimed that they tended to intervene more when working on other text types, for instance texts intended for publication. In her paper on the effects of language editing on hedges in academic discourse, Mauranen (1997) reports that the participants in her study believed that hedging was in the domain of the writer and deliberately chose not to intervene with it. It seems possible that translators might also be reluctant to intervene with the rhetorical devices used in a text. However, studies of self-translated academic discourse (i.e., texts translated by the authors themselves) show that author-translators tend to adjust the translated texts to the rhetorical conventions of the target culture (cf. Markkanen and Schröder's, 1989 study on hedging and Perales-Escudero and Swales's, 2011 study on rhetorical features of abstracts). Furthermore, if we consider its status of a covert translation, the need for a translated academic text to adhere to the norms of the target culture is quite obvious (above all in translation into English); this need has been stressed by researchers focusing on translation of academic discourse (e.g., Siepmann, 2006; Williams, 2007).

The fact that rhetorical conventions present challenges in translation of academic discourse needs to be taken into account in translator training. In order to adequately address these challenges in the translation classroom, we need to gain a better understanding of the trainee translators' awareness and perceptions of genre and rhetorical conventions in academic writing.

¹ Research on translation of academic discourse can, however, be based on comparable corpora, which are less difficult to compile. In fact, parallel texts have long been used in both contrastive and translation studies as (cf. Hartmann, 1980; Neubert & Shreve, 1992).

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