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VERB PLUS VERBAL NOUN COLLOCATIONS IN A TRANSLATIONAL LEARNER CORPUS

Mona ARHIRE[1]

Abstract: *The paper represents an account of the translation performance of master students at the Faculty of Letters in Braşov, Romania. More precisely, it focusses on their translating verb plus verbal noun collocations and the impact that their choices have on the target language text. The assessment is based on a bilingual parallel learner corpus made up of the English source-language text and a small-size Romanian translational sub-corpus. The research leads to findings relative to the quality of the translations, measures for improvement and the importance of adequate translation of linguistic devices affecting the target text stylistically.*

Key words: *corpus-based translation, learner corpus, collocation, translator training.*

1. Introduction

The fact that the lexical units of a language are arranged in an organized manner has long been well acknowledged. Their lack of randomness in co-occurrence can be linguistically accounted for in various ways. Structurally speaking, we are constrained to apply the norms of a language when displaying lexical units in a string, but there is also the issue of the natural way of lexical patterning in a language. There simply are given typical arrangement manners, unwritten rules for combining words together. The difficulty that such combinations pose in translation arises from the difference in patterning in different languages. For instance, the English collocation 'to get somebody wrong' finds its Romanian equivalent in 'a înțelege greşit', where the English 'get' is semantically limited to 'understand', which is explicitly revealed in its Romanian counterpart. Thus, out of the multitude of meanings that the English 'get' possesses in isolation or in other contexts, the only possible sense within this collocation is 'to understand'. For, as Newmark asserts: "The collocates within a collocation define and delimit each other by eliminating at least some of their other possible meanings." (Newmark, 1981, 114).

Also, the Romanian collocation is restricted to the use of the verb 'a înțelege' (to understand), with all the other meanings of the English 'get' excluded. Moreover, any synonym of the Romanian 'a înțelege' is out of the question when it joins the adjective 'greşit' (wrong) to form the said collocation.

[1] *Transilvania* University of Braşov, Faculty of Letters, Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics.

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This is but one of the several possible examples illustrative of the way lexical units are determined to combine in order to form collocations.

In support of this idea, Newmark, for instance, discusses "the range and acceptability of collocations" (Newmark, 1981, 114). And in line with this, Baker recognizes "the 'likelihood' of certain words occurring with other words and the naturalness or typicality of the resulting combinations" (Baker 47). She also states that: "It goes without saying that words rarely occur on their own; they almost always occur in the company of other words. But words are not strung together at random in any language; there are always restrictions on the way they can be combined to convey meaning." (Baker 46).

Further, we will be offering an insight into some systematic ways in which collocations have been classified so as to be able to narrow down the discussion to the specific topic announced in the title of this paper, namely the *verb plus verbal noun collocations* and their translation.

2. Definitions of collocations

Collocations have been defined, re-defined, and classified plenty of times by linguists from various perspectives. The explanation for this constant concern can be sought for in the arbitrary nature of collocations. Everybody agrees that collocations are strings of words that occur regularly or repeatedly together as combinations or syntagmatic relations. Nevertheless, their arbitrary nature, their multiple possibilities to employ word combinations in terms of grammatical classes, as well as their unpredictability have resulted into sundry attempts to provide clear definitions and classifications of collocations.

The definitions given to collocations are generally similar throughout the literature. Leech defined them as "the associations a word acquires on account of the meanings of words which tend to occur in its environment" (Leech 20). This is true if we consider that "words have a certain collocational range, i.e. they can collocate with certain sets of lexical items which are mutually exclusive, and which usually belong to the same grammatical class" (Pârlog et.al. 121). The example following this assertion is *We had ... at lunch*, in which the blanks can be filled by words either denoting food or referring to persons. For instance: "*We had potatoes at lunch* vs. *We had Mary at lunch*." (Pârlog et.al. 121).

However, this theory on the meaning-related proximity of words – extensively discussed in the literature (Firth; Sinclair; Hasan; Carter and others) – has further been nuanced to indicate that it is particular words engaging in some collocation or another and not their synonyms, for instance, which have, at least partly, the same meaning. In this respect, Lyons points out that the synonymous adjectives *large* and *big* are not replaceable in certain collocations (*a big mistake* vs. **a great mistake*) (Lyons 52) or might result into semantically different collocations (*a great man* vs. *a big man*).

As Larson simply puts it, "collocation is concerned with how words go together" (Larson 141). In the same line, Carter defines collocation as "a term used to describe a group of words which occur repeatedly in a language" (Carter 51). To Baker, collocations represent "the tendency of certain words to co-occur regularly in a given language" (Baker 47). According to Newmark: "A collocation consists basically of two or three lexical (sometimes called full, descriptive, substantial) words, usually linked by grammatical (empty, functional, relational) words" (Newmark, 1981, 114).

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Furthermore, Newmark metaphorically states that: "Grammar is the skeleton of a text; vocabulary, or, in a restricted sense, lexis, is its flesh; and collocations, the tendons that connect one to the other" (Newmark, 1995, 125). And "if grammar is the bones of a text, collocations are the nerves, more subtle and multiple and specific in denoting meaning…" (Newmark, 1995, 213).

3. Classification of collocations

Even though, as we have seen in the previous section, collocations have been consistently defined, it seems that the arbitrariness of collocations poses problems when it comes to determine whether a particular combination of words can be called a collocation, an idiomatic phrase, a fixed expression, a saying or a proverb, a catchphrase, an idiomatic simile a stereotype, etc. For, all of them are strings of words that occur as semantic units.

To refer but to the distinction between collocations and idioms, some linguists, like Carter, for instance, insist on the fact that they should not be treated separately since it is not worth finding a clear-cut distinction between them (Carter 161). Indeed, in many cases it is quite adventurous and irrelevant to attempt at telling one from the other.

Despite the difficulty of distinguishing collocations from idioms, to some other linguists, the distinction between them is viewed as follows: whereas the components of the former preserve their individual semantic independence, the lexemes making up an idiom create together a distinct meaning with the individual lexical elements losing their semantic individuality.

Several other linguists have tried their hand at providing a typology of collocations, idioms and other kinds of word-strings making up a meaningful whole.

As far as collocations are concerned, linguistics does benefit from several classifications. To start with, Benson (61-68) offers the distinction between grammatical collocations and lexical ones. The grammatical collocations consist of a core word or a lexical item (a verb, a noun, an adjective) which is usually followed by a grammatical item (a preposition) or a grammatical structure, such as an *–ing* form or a non-finite clause, for example.

The lexical collocations, on the other hand, are made up of a noun and its characteristic quality, expressed in an adjective or its characteristic action, expressed in a verb.

Newmark's categorization of collocations employs a division into seven groups even if he himself admits that the classification he proposes is more restricted than Firth's, who includes all the words or word-groups with which a word normally combines. Here is Newmark's classification of collocations (1981, 114-115):

a) verb + verbal noun;
b) determiner + adjective + noun;
c) adverb + adjective;
d) verb + adverb or adjective;
e) subject + verb;
f) count noun + 'of' + mass noun;
g) collective nouns + count noun.

In the present study, we shall only refer to Newmark's first category of collocations, namely the *verb + verbal noun* type.

4. Motivation, Research Questions and Methodology

As far as translation is concerned, as Newmark puts it: "Where a translator finds current and equally common corresponding collocations in source and

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target language texts, it is mandatory to use them; they are among the invariant components of translation" (Newmark, 1981, 116). At the same time, Hatim and Mason admit that translating collocations has always been a challenge and there is always the risk for translators to fail treating the collocations as such or finding a natural target language solution. However, when translating into one's mother tongue, the risk diminishes by careful revision. One other concern of translators should be the attempt to render collocations neither less nor more unexpected than they occur in the source language (Hatim & Mason 204).

Drawing on these assertions, the present study aims at looking into the extent to which MA-students at the Faculty of Letters, *Transilvania* University of Braşov, succeeded in translating English collocations by Romanian ones, Romanian being their native language.

To this end, the study has been grounded on a parallel bilingual learner corpus, made up of the English original text – the contemporary American short-story *Black Angels* by J.B. Friedman – and the translational sub-corpus, consisting of forty translations. The option for assessing the translational work of master students rests on the fact that they are close to potentially becoming translators. Hence, our interest revolves around the quality of their translational performance with a view to adjusting the input pertaining to the translator training component of the master study programme the students are attending. This is further thought to enhance the performance of translators and implicitly trigger higher quality in translation production on the local and national market when the language pair English and Romanian is concerned.

Therefore, the students were assigned the translation of the short-story as homework, with specifications relative to the importance of quality production. Being enrolled in a research-oriented MA, responsibility in students was also called for with regard to the reliability of the research depending on the quality of the corpus.

The translations were sent to the tutor before they were discussed in class as the seminar discussions would have definitely influenced the students' own versions. Furthermore, the translations have been filtered for relevance, the ones displaying low linguistic quality or being incomplete and inconsistent being excluded.

Subsequently, the corpus – consisting of translations collected during three academic years – was assessed by the tutor at different levels.

5. Analysis

The study focuses on the collocation type verb + verbal noun, following Newmark's first class of collocations as they have been translated by master students.

Before proceeding to the analysis proper, a clarification needs to be added with reference to Newmark's consideration of such collocations. Namely, that the verbs have only "operative function (they mean 'do') and no particularized meaning since the action is expressed in the noun." (Newmark, 1981, 114).

This is the case of collocations in the source language text, such as: *to catch one's breath, to give a break, to take a sip*. Out of them, we shall only discuss the investigation of the first, which is contextualized like this:

"Finally, when Stefano sank back **to catch his breath**, the gardener asked a question…" (Friedman 308).

According to an on-line dictionary (dictionary.reference.com), 'to catch one's breath' means 'to pause or rest before continuing an activity or beginning a new one; resume regular breathing'.

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The English-Romanian dictionary (Hulban 115) provides the definition of the collocation "catch one's breath" as "a-şi tine respirația", which, in our view, is not the right equivalent of the English collocation since it actually means *to keep one's breath*. Nevertheless, to Romanian natives, the corresponding collocation *a-şi trage sufletul* is quite common and represents the right translation solution. This is confirmed by DEX, which explains *a-şi trage sufletul* as *a-şi potoli respirația*, which overlaps with the English meaning. Hence, as already mentioned, not only would the use of the corresponding collocation in the target language have been preferred, but also mandatory in order to preserve the stylistic effect of the source language text and prevent the translation from employing any losses in this particular respect.

What the translational learner corpus reveals is that only eight students out of forty came up with the appropriate translation. Interestingly though, except for three students, all the others felt the need to translate the collocation by a collocation, but used an inappropriate one in Romanian. Their options – *a lua o gură de aer*, for instance – even if they do exist as collocations in Romanian, have a different meaning. However, it is worth mentioning that all the wrong translations – either due to the use of an inappropriate collocation or due to incorrect use of collocations – used either a noun meaning *breath* (*răsuflare, respirație, suflu)* or another noun related to the idea of *breathing* (*aer*, meaning *air*).

Another situation identified in the students' translations has been the merging of two Romanian collocations. For example: **a-şi trage răsuflarea,* which is a mixture of *a-şi trage sufletul* (the appropriate one) and *a-şi da răsuflarea* (meaning *to die*).

Only three students translated the English collocation by a Romanian verb and not a collocation. Out of them, two used verbs related to the idea of breathing (*a respira, a inspira*) and one opted for a more explanatory verb: *a se odihni,* which means *to rest*, and is close to the meaning of the source language collocation *to catch one's breath*. The stylistic effect is however affected, being neutralized and the style levelled out. The use of synonyms of the appropriate word additionally confirms the fact that the choice for words in collocations is not arbitrary even if collocations are arbitrary from the constructive point of view.

Quantitatively speaking, it results that only 20% of the students were able to deal with the translation of the collocation from English into Romanian although, when discussed at the seminar, the students' performance seemed much better.

6. Limitations

There are some limitations to this study, which we well recognize.

Firstly, it is the students' heterogeneous background in translation training, ranging from a few students having taken consistent training in translation theory and practice to others who have never or little been trained in this respect.

Secondly, the lack of sufficient motivation in students making translations can stem from the lack of a real-life, authentic setting. In other words, perhaps if they had not translated for a seminar but had been involved in a professional encounter, we expect that the students would have been more careful about the translational product they delivered.

7. Findings and Conclusions

As stated at the end of the analysis section, the percentage of satisfactory translations is 20%. The above-mentioned

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limitations to this study are at least partly explanatory for the findings. Another explanation can be the fact that the students are not fully aware of the importance of revision methods, which, consistently applied, could have reduced the amount of poor translations. Additionally, they either have not recognized collocations as such or have not treated them accordingly.

To the assessor it has been surprizing to find that oral assessment is often misleading, the overall impression being much better than the quality of the individual translations as revealed by the detailed investigation of the written translations, which is what matters. But for a thorough analysis of learners' translation work as written product, objective and balanced measures would not be possible for a translator trainer to take.

All in all, even if some collocations do not have a correspondent collocation in another language or learners of a language are mainly taught in the grammar and basic vocabulary of a language, translators should be helped to gain awareness of the importance of translating the stylistic subtleties, a small part of which being represented by collocations.

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