

Workshop proposal for the 56th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea

Translations in the history of languages:

From their position in historical corpora to their effects on language change

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Workshop description and research questions

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An account of language change that includes the role of translations is a challenge for any theoretical model. Recent studies have recognized a twofold relation between language change and translations: on the one hand, the study of translations can be part of a research methodology and provide vital data for the investigation of language change, and, on the other hand, translations can be seen as a trigger for language change of various types (Koller 1998; McLaughlin 2011).

The characteristics of translations as an important context of written language contact have been discussed in several studies on contact—for example, as related to ancient languages used for religious purposes (e.g., in the case of Sanskrit, Koine Greek, Latin and Classical Arabic). The role of translations is also obvious in the development of a language's prestige. The translation of ancient (especially Latin and Greek) works and of the biblical texts into late medieval and early modern European languages has been analyzed as an important factor for the emergence of the vernacular written languages (cf. Cornillie & Drinka 2019 [eds.]). Biblical translations, for instance, led to the realization that the vernaculars have all the necessary means of expressing the Bible. As a result, the publication of the Bible in the vernacular languages chronologically parallels the publication of grammar books in several northern European countries (Linn 2013). Certain grammatical and stylistic characteristics can be seen as related to the influence of translations in the standardization and establishment of the target language's prestige. Moreover, there is consensus that translations have been a major factor in the introduction of loanwords—for instance, in the case of the introductions of Latin loanwords into Early English (Lakoff 1972; van Hoecke & Goyens 1990; Delisle & Woodsworth 2012; Steiner 2008). Other studies have stressed that translations have transferred culture-specific concepts into various languages and cultures (Häcker 2011; Luraghi 2013 – cf. Luraghi & Cuzzolin 2007 on translations of Luke's Gospel into Latin, Gothic and Old Church Slavonic).

A thorough examination of the role of translations in the history of languages must confront several significant challenges. Below we include research topics that the workshop papers are invited to consider:

Translation effects that become features of non-translated texts of later periods

In the case of the transfer of syntactic constructions, an important research question to pursue concerns constructions that can be seen as translation effects but that also occur in non-translated texts in later periods of the target language: cf., for instance, the resumptive pronouns in the Septuagint and in later periods of the history of Greek (in post-Koine Greek). The question that arises in such cases is whether the innovative construction is due to a change in a native construction or is a borrowed construction. Native developments can be distinguished from borrowed constructions on the basis of the overall characteristics of the texts that include such constructions: whether they are different from non-translations of the period and whether they contain a large number of loanwords (Fischer 2007; 2013).

The position of retranlations in diachronic linguistic studies

It has been shown that retranlations may reflect the same order of changes as the diachrony of non-translations, and later innovative characteristics are demonstrated with higher frequency in later retranlations. In addition, a comparison of multiple translations of the same text in different periods allows the scholar to keep the topic and genre constant and to investigate the available lexicalization resources (Romaine 1985; Lavidas 2021).

Biblical translations as a diachronic corpus

Biblical translations constitute a “natural” parallel corpus involving a homogeneous pragmatic context. See, for instance, the annotated PROIEL Corpus (Haug & Jøhndal 2008). However, the factors of the faithfulness of the biblical translators or their tendency to override native characteristics of the target language pose a significant challenge to the use of biblical translations as a source of data (Gianollo 2011). An issue which adds further complexity to the use of the biblical corpus as a source of data, is the degree to which the Greek text has been influenced by Hebrew and Aramaic, whether directly as a *vorlage*, or indirectly by influencing the Greek dialect of the writers of free compositions (George 2010).

The hypothesis of biblical translations as a factor of language change

Drinka (2011, 2017) presents the connection between characteristics of the periphrastic progressive in the Septuagint, the Greek New Testament, the Latin Vulgate and Christian Latin texts. Similar constructions in Gothic and Old Church Slavonic complete the overall picture of a “sacral stamp” and mark the inclusion in the Christian literature. Note that, for Drinka (2011: 47; fn. 9), English biblical translations also present a “sacral stamp” through features of archaic language. A related issue is the use of a “hieratic register” from the Septuagint in the language of the New Testament (Léonas 2005; Tronci 2020).

Intralingual translations in the diachrony of languages

The characteristics of intralingual translations (religious and nonreligious) have been investigated in less detail, even though there is consensus that intralingual translations are also the result of a need for a new translation for linguistic reasons (and language change), among other reasons. In the case of intralingual translations, research could aim at exploring translations as a source of evidence for language change but also as factors triggering language change (among others, Muchnik 2003; Thim-Mabrey 2006; Denton 2007).

Translations as a source of unique data for historical linguistics

While historical translation data pose many challenges and must be approached with care, parallel corpora can provide unique data for historical linguistics. The earliest attestations of many languages are limited to translations (e.g. Gothic, Old Church Slavonic), and the existence of parallel texts allows us to test hypotheses about structures and especially semantics in these limited text corpora that would otherwise be untestable (see e.g. Eckhoff & Haug 2015 on Old Church Slavonic aspect). More work on statistical modelling and weighting of such data is needed.

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