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**Dynamics of meaning in specialized translation:  
A case study of noun clusters**

*PhD Thesis*

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## **Keywords**

translation, specialized translation, specialized text genres, translation theory, specialized translation theory, instruction manuals, instruction manual translation, noun clusters, complex noun phrases, large nominal groups, complex nominals, specialized terminology, specialized collocations, LSP translation, meaning in translation, semantic theory of translation, translation model

## Summary

The purpose of this doctoral thesis is to present and analyze some meaning-related aspects of translation theory and practice. It presents some major translation theories from the perspective of the notion of meaning, it then defines and describes specialized translation as a type of translation, and finally it identifies a specialized text genre (English instruction manuals) and, from this genre, a translation issue (noun clusters), which will be analyzed with the help of some specific semantic notions.

In writing this thesis I leave from the assumption that semantics, and linguistics in general, can be used more systematically in translation studies to advance the understanding of the complex phenomena involved in any translational process. The fact that semantics and translation can help each other should be obvious: both disciplines have to do with texts, both disciplines have to do with linguistic meaning, both disciplines have to do with the production, interpretation and comprehension of textual meaning. The similarities go even further. Roman Jakobson, in a known essay on translation, has shown that, at the most abstract level, semantics and translation are virtually the same thing, for each of them can be thought of as a three-type transfer: intralingual (semantics proper), interlingual (translation proper), intersemiotic (for instance, picture to text) (Jakobson 1992: 145). It seems natural under the circumstances to think that semantics and translation studies should have a lot in common and should help one another.

Unfortunately, this is hardly the case. There was a time around the middle of the twentieth century when linguistic theories were in fashion where translation is concerned, but that time has long since passed, leaving place to other approaches, more culturally or more pragmatically oriented. This situation is presented, and decried a little, by Henry Schogt, who states that “there is little positive interaction between the two” (Schogt 1992: 193). There is a mutual distrust between semanticists and linguists, on the one hand, and translators on the other: the former think translation studies is purely empirical, barely worth of being called a scientific discipline, and the latter think that present day semantics is a bunch of theoretical concepts with no relevance to actual translation work. It is my opinion that both disciplines would stand to gain from a closer relationship.

Although I present and use some semantic and linguistic notions in this paper, the point of view remains that of the translator. In other words, if I were to name the scientific discipline to which this paper belongs, I would say that is translation studies. This thesis has been written by a translator and is addressed mainly to translators. Semantic and linguistic notions are introduced and used only as working instruments, insofar as they are considered useful tools for the analysis of a translational issue. The topic analyzed relates to translation, the field is translation studies, the perspective is that of the translator.

My work as a translator was essential in the writing of the thesis. I have translated from and to Romanian, English, and French a number of texts in academic and professional environments in the past ten years. This work experience has given me the opportunity to link theory and practice in two ways. When I learn about a translation issue in a translation theory course or book, I try to capture it in the actual daily practice of translation. The reverse is also true: when I notice some recurrent issues in the translations assigned to me, I try to see if these have already been discussed by other authors or, as I have done in this thesis, I try to analyze them myself. This ensures that the thesis is both novel and relevant.

My experience in the translation of technical documents from English into Romanian has been of the utmost importance. Most of these technical documents are instruction manuals, which have provided me with the practical issue of this thesis – noun clusters. The theory of specialized discourse and translation is clear in this respect: nominalization is a very important characteristic of specialized texts (Newmark 1995: 151). As a translator, I felt that noun clusters provide a good opportunity to put meaning-related linguistic notions to work.

Something should be said of the methodology used in this thesis. Translation is such a complex phenomenon that you can hardly analyze it without first establishing a theoretical framework for the analysis. An effective method would be to consider three levels for analysis:

- the linguistic level;

The linguistic level is the level of the text itself, with all connected textual operations. Work at this level requires reading the original, analyzing syntactic and semantic relations, using the memory of past linguistic events, consulting dictionaries, glossaries, background and parallel texts, writing and revising the translation, etc. The linguistic level is the most conspicuous level



in any translational operation and it is also at this level that the translator usually spends most of his time.

- the pragmatic level;

The pragmatic level is about the context or situation in which translation takes place. Any text is born in a certain context, which is why an analysis of translation is bound to consider factors such as the identity, background, intentions of the author, background of the original (text type, function, purpose, adherence to canons and trends), identity, background, intentions of the translator, economic factors (payment), contractual factors (deadline, stipulation of terminology), etc. Such factors can thus be grouped under the headline *pragmatic*.

- the sociocultural level.

The sociocultural level is present in any translation, and it requires dealing with factors such as ideology, social, cultural, and political trends, ulterior motives, propaganda, philosophical issues, etc. The sociocultural level is about integrating the meaning of the original and that of the translation into the global network of meaning that underlies all cultures and societies, that underlies history itself. Analyzing the sociocultural aspects of translation requires knowing many things about the world and being able to make connections between events and knowledge that seem unconnected.

One remark about this three-level classification is that it is a matter of focus. Some issues are more clearly linguistic in nature, others are pragmatic, and yet others are sociocultural. This doesn't mean however that there is a neat separation between the three categories. Linguistic issues also have some pragmatic traces in them, pragmatic issues relate quite naturally to sociocultural issues. The classification only works in the context of its analytical goal.

Having presented my motives for writing this thesis, I continue with presenting its organizational structure. The introductory chapter is followed by the second chapter, entitled "Translational notions". This chapter presents translation theory: I first give some definitions of translation, then I present theories that I consider significant for present day translation studies. In the last section of the chapter, I adopt a semantic perspective towards some of these theories, that is to say, I look into how they incorporate and deal with the notion of meaning. The goal of the chapter is to assist the reader in understanding the field of translation studies, in grasping some

basic notions on translation, and in becoming aware of some of the drawbacks that I think current translation theory has.

The definitions of translation given in this chapter belong to Roman Jakobson, who divides translation into three categories (intralingual, interlingual, intersemiotic), Roger Bell, who focuses on the notion of equivalence, Eugene Nida and Charles Taber, who emphasize the notion of meaning as message and speak about relative equivalence, Katharina Reiss and Hans Vermeer, who are concerned with the purpose of translation and the situation in which translation takes place, and André Lefevere, who is more interested in “the cultural, ideological and poetological overtones” (Lefevere 1990: 18) of texts and their translations.

Based on these definitions, I then present some of the most important translation theories and notions. In the category of linguistic approaches, I present the notion of equivalence, translation strategies, procedures, and shifts. In the category of pragmatic approaches, I present text analysis, functionalist and communicative approaches. In the category of sociocultural theories, I present polysystem theory and descriptive translation studies, the binary notions of invisibility/resistance and postcolonial approaches, the semiotic approach.

In the last section of this chapter, to further develop the analysis of translation theory, the focus shifts to its semantic aspects. The aim is to analyze how some scholars use the notion of *meaning* in their approaches to translation. The hypothesis is that these approaches use more or less overtly the notion of meaning, which can be considered the essence of the translation process. I try to show that a distinction similar to John Stuart Mill’s *denotation/connotation* or Gottlob Frege’s *sense/reference* distinction, which will be presented in the next chapter, is present implicitly or explicitly in what I consider the most representative translation theories.

Linguistic theories are the ones where the use of the notion of meaning is more explicit. Meaning is fundamentally a linguistic notion. I analyze two well-known linguistic approaches: Eugene Nida’s and Peter Newmark’s. The two translation models analyzed here are based on, or at least imply, a theory of meaning. Whereas Eugene Nida has a more explicit semantic approach to translation, Peter Newmark’s semantic perspective is rather implicit. Many of the notions they present can be regarded from the perspective of meaning. They both see two levels in meaning. They both claim that there is a cognitive, objective component in meaning (the denotational,

referential level), and there is a more personal, subjective component, which Nida and Newmark call *connotations*.

In the category of pragmatic theories, the focus is on three pragmatic concepts: Hans Vermeer *skopos*, Katharina Reiss's *text type*, and the notion of *terminology* and *specialized term*. My goal is to show that even such pragmatic notions are based, at a more or less implicit level, on the notion of meaning. It is clear that, at least as far as translation is concerned, semantics and pragmatics cannot be separated. Translation studies has to adopt a unifying perspective, one which includes the relation between words and things and the relation between words and situations/users. This is possible if we consider that the situation in which meaning is produced and comprehended is an integral part of meaning.

The theories that focus on the sociocultural aspects of translation can also be analyzed from a broad semantic perspective. The relationship between language and society/culture has been quite extensively studied. Where translation is concerned, this relationship can be described as a mutual influence:

- Language helps to build society and culture;
- Social and cultural trends affect language.

Something similar has been suggested by many, among which I can quote Edward Sapir: “in the sense that the vocabulary of a language more or less faithfully reflects the culture whose purposes it serves it is perfectly true that the history of language and the history of culture move along parallel lines” (Sapir 1921). There is undoubtedly a close connection between language, culture and society. A general approach to translation must take into account the social and cultural aspects of meaning. The sociocultural theories analyzed are Gideon Toury's *norms*, Itamar Even-Zohar's *polysystem*, Lawrence Venuti's *resistance/invisibility* dichotomy. Sociocultural theories of translation deal with the notion of meaning at a more general level. People construct texts based on certain beliefs and assumptions they hold to be correct about the world. Texts are therefore the deposits and carriers of a community's spirit. Translations inevitably change the configuration of meaning in the target culture, i.e. they change the target culture itself. The words we hear and read shape our minds and lives.

The third chapter, “Semantic notions”, contains a presentation of the semantic notions which will be used in the case study in chapter 5. It is a general presentation mainly addressed to translators.

The notions are presented from a translator's point of view. I leave from the assumption that semantic notions can be used to get a better understanding of translation and that translation studies only stands to gain from a more meaning-oriented perspective. The semantic notions which will be used in the case study are: meaning and the semantics of nouns, compositionality, coherence, use. The choice is not random. I have selected the semantic notions which I think can be helpful in the analysis of noun cluster translation. It should be noted that I am going beyond the territory of what is usually considered, from an academic point of view, semantics. For instance, I am presenting the notion of use, which, in a strict classification, is the fundamental notion in pragmatics. The same goes for coherence, a notion used chiefly in discourse analysis. I am taking semantics in a broad sense, which allows me to deal with pragmatic, syntactic, and cultural issues as well.

The chapter ends with a presentation of some research done on noun clusters and it should constitute a point of departure in the understanding of noun clusters and the role they play in specialized discourse. It contains research that I deem particularly relevant to the subject of my thesis. The authors presented come from various fields and theoretical backgrounds, a fact which can be easily noticed in their contributions. This is natural, given that noun clusters are a subject of interest in many fields ranging from semantics, translation studies, terminology studies, computational linguistics, to language for specialized purposes (LSP), lexicology, information retrieval, ontology, artificial intelligence, etc. The authors presented are: Bertha Leiva de Izquierdo and Dan Bailey, who addresses the issue of complex noun phrases and nominals from the perspective of teachers and students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) programmes, Carol Jean Godby, who addresses in her PhD thesis the issue of English *lexicalized noun phrases*, which she defines as “multi-word phrases that can function as the subject or object of a sentence and have been collected and defined in dictionaries” (Godby 2002: 1), Ralph Grishman, who is interested in “domain modeling for language analysis” (Grishman 1988: 1), Greg Myers, who is concerned with how lexical cohesion contributes greatly to the formation of specialized discourse and knowledge, Henrik Høeg Müller, who adopts a cognitive point of view in a study of how nominal constructions are used in languages for specific purposes (LSP).

The fourth chapter, entitled “Specialized translation and instruction manuals”, narrows the scope of the research. It takes a closer view at a kind of translation, specialized translation, and a particular text genre, instruction manuals, and thus prepares the ground for the practical chapter and the application it contains: a semantic analysis of English noun clusters and their translation into Romanian.

Because noun clusters occur in specialized discourse, something has to be said of the kind of translation that deals with specialized texts – specialized translation. A particularly fruitful way of analysing and classifying translation is by source text topic (or domain or field). Consequently, *specialized translation* is the translation of texts belonging to “specialist subject fields falling under non-literary translation, the best known of which include science and technology, economics, marketing, law, politics, medicine and mass media” (Gotti & Šarčević 2006: 9). Specialized translation may also be encountered under the name of *technical translation*, which is defined by Sue Ellen and Leland Wright as “the translation of special language texts, i.e., texts written using Languages for Special Purposes (LSP)” (1993: 1). Specialized translation can be “distinguished from other forms of translation by terminology” (Newmark 1995: 151), by grammatical features – “for English, passives, nominalisations, third persons, empty verbs, present tenses” (p. 151) – by characteristic formats such as technical reports, instruction manuals, notices, publicity, etc., and by its typical lack of “emotive language, connotations, sound-effects and original metaphor” (p. 151). It can be asserted that specialized translation is a form of translation whose main characteristics are given by the specialized nature of the texts to be translated.

Because the specificity of specialized translation lies in the specialized character of the texts to be translated, presenting the features of specialized translation is equivalent to presenting the features of specialized discourse. These features are linguistic: terminology, phraseology, style, register; pragmatic: text type and variety, text function, audience; sociocultural: polysystem, norms, sociocultural assumptions.

Because all the examples of noun clusters come from the text genre called *instruction manuals*, something should be said of it as well. One of the most frequent specialized text genres of today is *instruction manuals*, a term into whose sphere I include any kind of technical or user documentation, from the smallest to the largest. I give a short presentation of the role text genres

play in specialized communication and then I analyze instruction manuals based on Anthony Pym's framework of genre analysis, which looks at seven features of any genre:

- a. a communicative function, often indicated by the operative verbs, giving the text a "rhetorical purpose"
- b. a common length
- c. a macrostructure (functions and sub-functions)
- d. a similar discursive mode of developing the macrostructure (narrative, descriptive, imperative, optative), often indicated by the use of personal pronouns
- e. a common lexical and syntactic arrangement of the material and a common set of functional units and formal features, e.g. in statutes and other legislative texts, the abundant use of indefinite pronouns, passives and impersonal forms of the verb
- f. common socio-pragmatic conventions, e.g. the hierarchical structure of forms of address
- g. common lexical items. (Pym)

This chapter ends with a presentation of the corpus used for this thesis, which is bilingual – English and Romanian – and contains English instruction manuals together with their Romanian translations. I had access to these translations because I use a piece of translation software called *translation memory*, which is a sort of database in which translations are memorized on a segment by segment basis. From a quantitative perspective, I used 20 such bilingual translation memories, totalizing 3381845 words/tokens, including repetitions and numbers, for the English text, and 3472770, including repetitions and numbers, for the Romanian text. Given that these numbers include repetitions and numbers, the actual number is much smaller. The English part of the corpus has a type-token ratio of 0.008 (0.8%), while the Romanian corpus has a type-token ratio of 0.011 (1.1%). The extremely low type-token ratios are typical for specialized discourse, and show how standardized and repetitive these documents are. Although the corpus contains lots of occurrences in both English and Romanian, the distinct lexical items that are used are actually very few. For the case study, I also used a concordancer, which is a "a piece of software, either installed on a computer or accessed through a website, which can be used to search, access

and analyze language from a corpus. They can be particularly useful in exploring the relationships between words and can give us very accurate information about the way language is authentically used” (Peachey 2005). I used AntConc, a concordancer that can be downloaded free of charge from <http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/software.html> and is the work of Laurence Anthony, professor at Waseda University of Japan.

Finally, the fifth chapter, entitled “A case study of English noun clusters and their translation into Romanian”, deals with a practical issue from the translation of instruction manuals from English into Romanian – noun clusters – which it analyzes with the help of the semantic notions proposed in chapter 3. The purpose of this chapter is to use several semantic notions in the analysis of a translation issue and to show that such semantic notions are relevant to the practice and theory of translation. I selected an issue worthy of investigation from the translation of English instruction manuals, and then I identified several semantic notions which can be used to get a better understanding of this translation issue. The issue is the Romanian translation of English large nominal groups, referred to as *noun clusters*. The semantic notions that I used are *compositionality*, *specialized terminology and collocations*, *coherence relations*, *context of use*. I used these notions in an analysis of noun clusters to cast light on their structure, on how they are formed, on how they are used and translated. The case study is divided into 3 sections: goals, results and discussions, conclusions.

The structure of noun clusters is a matter of *compositionality*. Because of their specialized character, the elements forming noun clusters can be analyzed through notions like *specialized terms* and *collocations*. The meaning of a noun cluster can be thought of as a coherent combination of the meanings of its constituents. In other words, one must look for a pattern of coherence or a *coherence relation* between the elements of that noun cluster. Also, from a more pragmatic perspective, the use of noun clusters is connected to certain *contexts* and their *translation* displays certain characteristics.

The general objective of this case study was to show that noun clusters are a specific case of linguistic compositionality – a specialized type of compositionality – in that their meaning can be derived from the meaning of their constituents, many of which are specialized formations like terms and field-specific collocations, and also a particular type of abbreviation – a specialized type of abbreviation – in that their surface structure contains in a compact nominal form the

meaning that, at a more fundamental level, is contained in a clausal form. These are significant characteristics with regard to translation. To reach this overall objective, I divided it into three categories of goals, having to do with:

- lexical structure
- coherence relations
- use and translation.

In the last chapter of the thesis, entitled “Conclusions”, I draw the necessary conclusions, which can be divided into two categories – theoretical and practical. Theoretical conclusions concern translation theory, with a focus on specialized translation. They also bear on the relationship between translation studies and linguistics, semantics in particular. Practical conclusions are concerned with issues, methods, and strategies in the translation of instruction manuals from English into Romanian, and particularly in the translation of noun clusters.



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