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The thesis statement in translations of academic discourse: an exploratory study

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that languages exhibit substantial differences in the conventions of academic discourse. The thesis statement has been identified as one of the conventions in which differences between languages have been observed. This paper analyses thesis-statement use and form in a corpus of 90 geography research articles: Slovene originals, their English translations, and English originals are compared in terms of thesis-statement use and form. The results show that the thesis statement is used more frequently in original English research articles than in original Slovene research articles, and that the English translations of the latter correspond to the Slovene originals. The results also reveal differences between the two sets of originals in terms of thesis-statement position and the degree of authorial presence, again with the English translations corresponding to the Slovene originals. A comparison of the Slovene originals and their English translations identifies certain changes made during translation. The findings of this study suggest that the differences in thesis-statement use and form between the two languages could create problems in translation.

KEYWORDS

Academic discourse, thesis statement, rhetorical conventions, research article, language for specific purposes.

1. Introduction

The translation of academic discourse involves complex issues arising at different levels. These range from the general approach or translation strategy used by the translator to issues involving a particular text or even its constituent linguistic or textual features. In her discussion of translation for specific purposes focusing on economics texts, Stolze (2003: 189) points out that "[w]ith respect to the intrinsic relationship between the text as a whole and its constitutional elements, the holistic view is being complemented by an analysis of the predicative mode, which shows in the particular style of the text characterising its author." Although it is clear that a holistic view of the text is essential for providing a theoretical framework for translating academic discourse, data obtained through exploratory and in-depth studies of the issues arising in this type of translation can complement a holistic approach.

This paper presents an exploratory empirical study of a single rhetorical convention: the use and form of the thesis statement in research articles. Using a corpus of 90 geography research articles comprising three sets of texts (original Slovene research articles, their English translations, and original English research articles), differences are identified between the

Slovene and English originals on the one hand, and the Slovene originals and their English translations on the other. The aim of this paper is to investigate issues related to the thesis statement when research articles are translated from Slovene into English. This is based on the hypothesis that there may be substantial differences in thesis-statement use and form between the two languages, which could lead to problems in translation.

2. The translation of academic discourse

A lack of interest in issues involving the translation of academic discourse has been pointed out by researchers working in this field. In his overview of the historical development of technical and scientific translation, Franco Aixelá (2004) shows that this type of translation has been traditionally neglected in theoretical discussions, although he notes a gradual change in attitude. Similarly, Sarukkai (2001: 650) observes that the problems in translating scientific texts are hardly ever addressed. This neglect suggests that the translation of academic discourse has been perceived as straightforward, of marginal importance, and perhaps infrequent. This perception, however, does not reflect the real picture: academic discourse is in fact translated relatively frequently. Outside the English-speaking world, many journals demand that abstracts be submitted in at least two languages, many university departments require translations of thesis and dissertation abstracts, certain journals publish parallel versions of the same paper in two languages, individual researchers commission the translation of their papers into English, and so on. Moreover, academic translation is multifaceted and involves complex issues and translation problems ranging from terminology to genre- and culture-bound conventions.

It has been suggested that the concept of academic discourse involves an apparent paradox: as Mauranen (1993) points out, academic writing is both universal (because it originates in the universality of science) and simultaneously variable (because it reflects cultural variation). Studies in contrastive rhetoric (e.g., Dahl 2004; Yakhontova 2002; Vassileva 2001; Čmejrková 1996; Mauranen 1993; Hinds 1987) have identified substantial differences in the conventions of academic writing across languages. Within the field of Translation Studies, similar observations have been made. Thus, on the basis of her findings, Hoorickx-Raucq (2005: 105) argues that "the discourse of science in our global world is still highly cultural both in its textual structures or sequencing and in its cognitive processes."

The logical question that such findings raise is whether adherence to target language conventions is necessary in translation. In his discussion of this topic, Siepmann (2006: 144–45) rejects the views proposed by Stolze & Deppert (1998: 127), who argue in favour of a compromise

between preservation and adaptation, and he calls for "optimum adherence to the stylistic norms of the target language."

3. The thesis statement

One of the conventions in which languages may differ is the use of the thesis statement. The thesis statement is a sentence (or, less frequently, a string of sentences), generally appearing at the end of the introductory section of the paper, stating the main idea or principal goals of the paper. Although the term itself is used chiefly in the context of essay writing for teaching first-, second-, and foreign-language writing, it is sometimes used in reference to other genres. In this paper, it is used in the context of academic writing; specifically, the research article. In Swales' (1990) model for a rhetorical structure in research article introductions (the revised CARS model based on an earlier CARS model proposed by Swales in 1981), the thesis statement corresponds to Step One in Move Three (outlining purposes or announcing present research within the context of occupying the niche).

Although the thesis statement has been recognised as a convention of English academic discourse and is presented as an important feature in EAP textbooks (e.g., Swales & Feak 1999), there is less certainty about the status of the thesis statement in Slovene academic writing. Previous research has established that Slovene academic writing is less writer-responsible (in terms of Hinds' 1987 typology) than English academic writing (cf. Pisanski Peterlin, 2005), which suggests that the thesis statement, the purpose of which is to facilitate the reading of the text, may appear less frequently in Slovene academic texts. Moreover, Petrić (2005: 214) reports that contrastive studies of English and Slavic languages (e.g., Duszak 1994; Čmejrková 1996) have revealed that delayed expression of purpose and gradual development of the thesis are important features of Slavic languages, which further supports the hypothesis.

4. Materials and method

4.1 Corpus

The corpus used in this analysis is composed of 90 units, all of them geography research articles, and is subdivided into three subcorpora: the ACTA-S Subcorpus, the ACTA-E Subcorpus, and the AG Subcorpus. The ACTA-S Subcorpus consists of 30 Slovene geography articles and the ACTA-E Subcorpus consists of the English translations of these Slovene articles. All of the texts were published between 1999 and 2005 in *Acta Geographica Slovenica*, a Slovene geography journal published by the Anton Melik Geographical Institute, dedicated mainly to Slovene geography. The AG Subcorpus consists of 30 English research articles, published between 2001 and 2006 in *Applied Geography*, an international

geography journal published by Elsevier dedicated to the application of geographical theory and methodology to the resolution of human problems.

4.2 Method

The thesis statement was identified in the texts following three criteria. The first criterion was its function. The thesis statement is not a formal category, and therefore, a functional analysis was necessary for identification of thesis statements. The thesis statement was defined as the sentence(s) stating the main idea(s), purpose(s), result(s), and/or scope of the research article. The second criterion was its location. Sentences corresponding to the above definition were identified as thesis statements only if they appeared in the introductory section of the research article, whereas similar statements in other sections of the research article were not considered thesis statements. The third criterion was explicitness. It was required that explicit reference to the function of the thesis statement be made within the thesis statement itself, either by referring to the research article itself (e.g., "this article considers, in this article/paper, here," etc.) or, by extension, to the authors (e.g., "we").

The analysis was carried out in three stages. In the first stage, all of the introductory sections of the articles in the three subcorpora were manually scanned and instances of thesis statements were identified according to the criteria presented above. In the second stage of the analysis, the results for the three subcorpora were compared in terms of thesis-statement frequency, thesis-statement position within the introduction, and the degree of authorial involvement as expressed in the form of the thesis statement. In the third stage of analysis, the results for individual Slovene originals in the ACTA-S Subcorpus and their English translations in the ACTA-E Subcorpus were examined: the degree of correspondence in thesis-statement use and form was noted for each original and translation pair.

5. Results

The results of the first and second stages of the analysis are presented in Tables 1–3, and the results of the third stage of the analysis are presented in Table 4. Table 1 presents basic information on the size of the subcorpora. In addition, the frequency of thesis-statement use is expressed, both in terms of the number of research articles which contained a thesis statement as well as the percentage of research articles which contained a thesis statement.

	ACTA-S	ACTA-E	AG
Subcorpus size (words)	130,000	150,000	200,000
Research articles in the subcorpus (n)	30	30	30
Research articles containing a thesis statement (n)	16	16	25
Research articles containing a thesis statement (%)	53.3	53.3	83

Table 1. Subcorpus size in terms of words and texts and the frequency of thesis-statement use in a subcorpus

The data presented in Table 1 clearly show that the use of the thesis statement was more restricted in the Slovene research articles and their translations (in 53.3%) than in the original English research articles, where it was used in over 80% of the texts.

Table 2 presents the position of the thesis statements identified in the corpus in terms of three microlocations (initial, medial, and final) within the introductory section.

	ACTA-S	ACTA-E	AG
Initial (%)	6 (37.5)	6 (37.5)	5 (20)
Medial (%)	2 (12.5)	2 (12.5)	5 (20)
Final (%)	8 (50)	8 (50)	15 (60)

Table 2. Thesis-statement position in the introductory section

The data presented in Table 2 indicate that a preference for the final position can be observed within all three subcorpora. However, this preference is somewhat more pronounced in the original English research articles than in the Slovene originals and their English translations.

Table 3 presents the form of the thesis statement in terms of explicit authorial presence. The degree of authorial presence is schematically divided into three categories: personal subject (including thesis statements containing a personal construction, such as the first-person pronoun in English or a first-person singular/dual/plural verb in Slovene), passive voice (encompassing thesis statements containing a verb in the passive voice), and inanimate subject (covering thesis statements containing an inanimate subject with the active voice, such as "this paper," "the main goal of this article," etc.).

	ACTA-S	ACTA-E	AG
Personal subject (%)	37.5	37.5	24
Passive voice (%)	12.5	12.5	18.8
Inanimate subject (active, %)	50	50	58

Table 3. Degree of explicit authorial involvement in the thesis statement

The data presented in Table 3 show that inanimate subjects with the active voice were the preferred thesis-statement form in the original English texts, in which personal subjects and the passive voice were used considerably less frequently. The Slovene originals and their English translations, however, showed a somewhat greater preference for inanimate subjects over personal subjects, whereas the passive voice was used relatively rarely.

Table 4 presents the results established through a comparison of the thesis statements appearing in the Slovene originals and their English translations. Each thesis statement in the Slovene original was compared with the corresponding thesis statement in the English translation and the degree of correspondence was first determined in terms of two categories: the translation was assessed as either literal (the choice of words, grammatical form, and discourse function coincide) or not, in which case it was classified as 'changed.'

Degree of correspondence	
Literal translation (%)	8 (50)
Change in translation (%)	8 (50)

Table 4. Degree of correspondence between Slovene texts and their English translations

The results show that, even though close correspondence in translation has been observed so far (cf. Tables 1–3), some change did occur in half of the translations of thesis statements.

6. Discussion

The above results show considerable differences in thesis-statement use between the Slovene originals and their English translations on the one hand, and the English originals on the other. The frequent use of the thesis statement in the English originals (83% of texts) agrees with the

findings of previous research (e.g., Myers, 1992; Paltridge, 1997), which indicated that the thesis statement is a feature of English academic discourse. Moreover, the far less systematic use of thesis statements in the Slovene originals (these appeared in just over half of the texts) corresponds to the findings of contrastive research on English and Slavic languages (e.g., Duszak, 1994; Čmejrková, 1996).

A comparison of the thesis-statement position within the introductory section revealed that the final position was preferred in all of the subcorpora. This is not surprising: as has been pointed out, the thesis statement corresponds to Step One in Move Three within the theoretical framework of the CARS model proposed by Swales (1990). Move Three is, of course, the last of the three moves in the introduction identified by Swales. The findings of this study, however, suggest that thesis statements were used outside this framework (in initial and the medial positions) somewhat more frequently in the Slovene originals and their English translations than in the English originals. Examples of a Slovene original (1a) and its English translation (1b), in which the thesis statement occurs in initial position, are given below:

(1a) 1 Uvod
       Pričujoči članek želi prikazati širitev mesta Ljubljana in postopen premik njegove južne meje na Ljubljansko barje. Izhajal sem iz dejstva, da se je Ljubljana zelo pozno začela širiti proti jugu, torej na barje, kljub temu pa je vrh največje urbanizacije že dosežen. Predpostavil sem, da proces poselitve še ni zaključen, vendar pa so začrtane že vse glavne smeri in da je večji del območja že poseljen.

(1b) 1 Introduction
       This article presents the expansion of the City of Ljubljana and the gradual spread of its southern border onto the Ljubljansko Barje moor. My starting point was the fact that Ljubljana started to expand southward onto the moor very late, but in spite of this, the peak of the greatest urbanization has already been achieved. I assumed that although the process of settling is not yet finished, all the major directions have been established and the major part of the area has already been settled.

Example 2 from an English translation illustrates a more common final position of the thesis statement within the introductory section.

(2)   1 Introduction
       Walking in the mountains, one sometimes contemplates the transitory nature of things; only the mountains seem to remain eternally the same in their beauty. Mountains are formed and exist for long millions of years, but they too slowly disappear and finally make way for something new. This changing of the relief takes place before our eyes, but we generally do not notice it because of the short duration of our lives (Natek 1985). Wind, water in all forms, temperature changes, and gravity slowly and steadily release and carry material from the mountains down to the valleys. Periodically, large rock masses or even entire hillslopes suddenly roll down into the valleys, which is why the relief in the Alps changes relatively quickly. In the occurrence of rockfalls, Slovenia's Alps are no exception. We are never aware of smaller rockfalls because they occur more frequently in uninhabited or remote areas. We are only reminded of them by geomorphic processes of larger

dimensions that cause damage to residential and infrastructure objects (Pavšek 1994; Komac and Zorn 2002). Rockfalls are generally one of the more visible and faster geomorphic processes. They occur on steeper hillslopes in the mountain world as well on the steep banks of rivers and coastal cliffs. In this article, only a few examples from Slovenia's alpine world are treated.

With regard to the authorial presence, several interesting observations can be made. Although impersonality is often regarded as a typical feature of academic discourse, several authors have pointed out that personal presence is a necessary feature as well. Thus Hyland (2001: 223) argues that the use of personal structures (or self-mention) is important in academic writing; he claims that the "points at which writers choose to announce their presence in the discourse are those where they are best able to promote themselves and their individual contributions." In other words, although impersonality is a feature of academic discourse which is used to create distance between the author and the ideas expressed in the text, thus conveying an impression of objectivity, the use of authorial presence is a way of promoting the author's role as the individual responsible for the creation of the text. The form of the thesis statement reflects this personal vs. impersonal structure dichotomy in the choice between a personal subject on the one hand, and the passive voice or an inanimate subject with the active voice on the other. The more subtle difference between the two impersonal constructions – the passive voice and the inanimate subject – has been explained by Martínez (2001), who claims that the passive voice, in which the agent is often recoverable (in the case of the thesis statement, generally as the author), is somewhat less impersonal than a sentence with an inanimate subject.

A comparison of the results of this study shows that certain differences in preference regarding the author's presence can be observed: the English originals exhibit different tendencies than the Slovene originals and their English translations reveal.

In the English originals, inanimate subjects were used in just over half of the thesis statements, and personal subjects and the passive voice were each used in approximately one quarter of the thesis statements. In the Slovene originals and their English translations, however, inanimate and personal subjects were used with a similar frequency, and the use of the passive voice was quite restricted. The examples below show instances of the different degrees of authorial presence from all three subcorpora. Examples 3, 4, 5a, and 5b illustrate the use of the personal subject in thesis statements, 3 and 4 are from original English research articles, and 5a and 5b are a Slovene original and its translation.

(3)   In this paper we examine the place-based theory of environmental evaluation and its major supposition, the concept of geographic discounting, using survey data collected from individuals living in communities near the Chugach National Forest in Alaska (USA).

(4)   In this paper we report on research aimed at developing a set of methods designed to assist road departments in rural jurisdictions mitigate hazards along roads under their management.

(5a)   V članku predstavljamo erozijo prsti v Sloveniji, posebej pa meritve erozije, opravljene na njivi v porečju Besnice severozahodno od Kranja.

(5b)   In this article we present soil erosion in Slovenia, particularly measurements of erosion taken on a field in the Besnica Valley northwest of Kranj.

Examples 6, 7, 8a, and 8b illustrate the use of the passive voice in thesis statements; 6 and 7 are from original English research articles, and 8a and 8b are a Slovene original and its translation.

(6)   In this paper, it is argued that different understandings of the meaning of 'home' form an important context for the difficulties that have been faced by policy-makers in responding to the Bosnian emergency since 1995.

(7)   In this paper, the small catchment of Hey Clough and its environs is described.

(8a)   V tem prispevku so predstavljene osnovne značilnosti kamnin, reliefa, prsti in rastja Dobrepoljsko-Struškega krasa.

(8b)   In this study, the basic characteristics of the rock, relief, soil, and vegetation of the Dobrepolje-Struge karst are presented.

Examples 9, 10, 11a, and 11b illustrate the use of the inanimate subject in thesis statements; 9 and 10 are from original English research articles, and 11a and 11b are a Slovene original and its translation.

(9)   This paper presents results on estimated changes in soil C stocks over the period 1939–2000 using the Land Utilization Survey (LUS) of 1938/1939 and LANDSAT TM satellite imagery of 1990 and 1999/2000, in combination with soil maps and data from the NI Soil Survey.

(10)   Using basic techniques derived from Crime Pattern Analysis, this paper seeks to demonstrate how particular variables relating to where and when violent crime occurs are valuable in identifying the geography of city-centre violent crime.

(11a) Članek obravnava vzroke in posledice visokih vod novembra leta 2000 na območju naselij Bač, Knežak in Koritnice v občini Ilirska Bistrica.

(11b) The article discusses the reasons and consequences of high waters in November 2000 in the region of the settlements Bač, Knežak and Koritnice in the municipality of Ilirska Bistrica.

These results may seem to suggest that the more frequent use of the personal subject in the Slovene originals and their translations (compared to the English originals) indicates that the Slovene authors wished to promote themselves and their role in their work in the thesis statements, and that the translations attempted to capture this. However, a closer examination of the individual thesis statements reveals that this is probably not be the case at all. In fact, it seems that the ratio of the three authorial-presence categories in Slovene and English may to some extent

reflect the general characteristics of the two languages. The limited use of the passive voice in the Slovene originals seems to reflect a systemic difference between English and Slovene: in Slovene, the use of the passive voice is more restricted in general (Blaganje & Konte 1998: 295, 302) and the structure itself appears to be considered stylistically inappropriate. In addition to this, the tendency to use the first person plural to indicate that the author does not wish to promote him or herself personally (the so-called *pluralis modestiae*) is a traditional convention in Slovene academic writing (for an in-depth discussion on the rhetorical conventions and the authorial presentation in scientific texts in Slavic languages, see Čmejrková, 2007). The fact that the active voice is retained in all the translations in which it was used in the Slovene originals is a sign of the general tendency observed in the ACTA-E subcorpus to keep as close to the original as possible.

So far, the results of the analysis have shown a preference for a close correspondence between the original and the translated version of thesis statements: a closer examination of the individual pairs of the Slovene originals and their English translations, however, reveals that the precise realisations are literal translations in half of all the cases. In the remaining eight cases, changes which could generally be described as improvements in terms of TL conventions were observed. Three types of differences between the original and the translation were identified. In one example, the content of the thesis statement in the translation is different from that of the original thesis statement. Thus, the thesis statement in the Slovene original states that the paper is composed of two parts and that the first part is an attempt to establish certain geographical-developmental factors, and so on. It then goes on to state the content of the second part. In the English translation (example 12), however, the thesis statement is simplified and the content of the first part of the paper is expressed as the main goal of the paper:

(12) This article is an attempt to identify some geographical-developmental factors . . .

Three cases involve a change in the choice of tense. In two of the Slovene articles, the thesis statement is expressed in the future tense and in one in the past tense; all three English translations, however, are in the present tense. Examples 13a–c below illustrate this change (13a is the original thesis statement, 13b its literal translation, and 13c the translation which was actually used):

(13a)V članku smo pozornost namenili...
(13b)In the article, we focused on...
(13c)In this article, we focus on...

In half of the instances, the only difference was in the exact wording. In some cases, the choice seems an arbitrary one. In others, the word order of the two language is generally different and this was reflected in the

word order of the thesis statement, and in some cases the original itself was relatively clumsy or it involved structures not typical of the thesis statement, and the translations tried to improve the style. Examples 14a–c below illustrate this point (14a is the original thesis statement, 14b the literal translation, and 14c the translation which was actually used):

(14a) Pričujoči članek želi prikazati...
(14b) The present article wishes to present...
(14c) This article presents...

In the 16 Slovene thesis statements, the combination of *wish + to present* (*želeti + prikazati*) occurs in four instances, which suggests that this may be one of the more common ways of expressing the thesis statement in Slovene geography research articles. No combinations with *wish* occurred in the 25 original English thesis statements. It also seems that, in English, the combination of an inanimate subject (e.g., *the article*) with a verb of volition, such as *wish*, is awkward. Combinations of an inanimate subject (e.g., *this paper*) and a verb such as *seek* or *attempt*, however, express a similar idea in a more conventional manner.

7. Conclusion

The principal aim of this paper was to examine the issues arising in the translation of research articles from Slovene into English related to the thesis statement. The analysis was based on the hypothesis that there may be considerable differences in thesis-statement use and form between the two languages which could lead to problems in translation. The findings of the analysis confirmed the original hypothesis: it was established that there are in fact substantial differences in the frequency of thesis-statement use in the Slovene originals and English originals; this difference, however, was not reflected in the English translations of the Slovene originals. Differences were also observed between the two sets of originals in terms of thesis-statement position and form: in both respects, the English translations corresponded to the Slovene originals. A further comparison of the thesis statements identified in the Slovene originals and their English translations showed that literal translation was used in half of the cases, and changes which could generally be described as improvements in terms of TL conventions were observed in the other half.

Because the thesis statement can be interpreted as an aspect of reader-oriented writing, the findings of the analysis presented here support the results of previews research (Pisanski Peterlin, 2005), which showed that Slovene academic writing is in general somewhat less reader-oriented than English academic writing and most probably follows its own conventions, typical of this genre in Slovene. This suggests that complex issues may arise in translating academic discourse between the two languages: the differences in rhetorical conventions may lead to translations which fail to conform to TL conventions.

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Biography

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