Could You Check This, Please? Experiences in a Bilingual Environment

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Abstract: This paper describes some experiences of a proof reader and translator working in a very specific bilingual linguistic environment. Bilingualism has a peculiar effect on the use of technical English, as seen with language users at Subotica Tech. Vajdaság is a unique location in terms of language composition. While for many, Hungarian is the first language, there is some language transfer from Serbian, especially concerning the use of English technical terminology in native language texts. A number of examples are offered to show different patterns that may be explained by the overwhelming influence of the first language.

Keywords: technical English; bilingualism; Vajdaság; proofreading; correction

1 Introduction

This article is an overview of the experiences of a professional proof reader regarding the use of technical English by native speakers of Hungarian and native speakers of Serbian from the territory of Vajdaság. All linguistic examples were taken from papers written at Subotica Tech, where the author is currently employed. The author has been working as a translator and proof reader for technical English, and more specifically, for the fields of electrical and mechanical engineering, as well as for informatics. The English language encountered by the author bears some specific markers stemming from the influences of the first language, or conversely, they may appear due to the fact that the users are bilingual. The samples presented in this paper are taken from young professionals with university degrees in engineering (electrical and mechanical engineering, or computer sciences) except in one instance, where it is a doctoral degree in informatics.

With the unstoppable spread of IT technologies, and primarily the computer, English as a global technical lingua franca has toppled the previous primary technical language, German. Consequently, this means that hardly anyone can vie

for a career in the domain of engineering without a passable knowledge of the English language. The majority of people who have agreed to have their works analyzed from a language point of view for this study are involved in doctoral studies, where there is a constant need for presenting new research results, writing papers and giving presentations at conferences. While all of the participants did take English as a compulsory subject during their university studies, since then they have mainly used English passively, in written articles. For the sake of clarity, the term 'writer' will be used to denote the participants whose samples are presented in this work, while 'author' will refer exclusively to the author of this present article.

This work is not written with the intention of making concrete generalizations that hold true for the use of technical English of all speakers of Hungarian and Serbian in Vajdaság. The aim is to present some of the linguistic problems and repeated patterns that the author has met in her work based on the samples listed below.

2 Method

The method of proof reading has become a great deal easier with the widespread use of the word processor's 'track changes' option. However, the author's preferred method of correction is more old-school: to put the incorrect or unnecessary words in brackets, insert the correct version so both the incorrect and the now corrected text can be seen, and finally modify the font color of these to some shade of blue or turquoise. The author prefers the use of cold colors (softer shades of blue, green or turquoise) as these will appear less "offensive" to the original writer of the proofread text. This has been repeatedly confirmed in follow-up conversations regarding the proofread text, when the writers would point out that the usual color for correcting, red, made their own work seem much worse, much more "full of mistakes" than if the same number of mistakes were highlighted in turquoise. For the sake of visibility in a monochrome color setting, a different font was used, **Britannica Bold**, to highlight the corrections.

3 Technical English

Time is a crucial factor in technical English since the need for up-to-date knowledge does not allow users of manuals or technical descriptions of novel technologies to wait for the translation into a national language. Engineers need to be able to read, comprehend, and as the ultimate test, implement the new material written in technical English. While certainly a large corpus of the technical vocabulary dates back centuries and is morphologically firmly based on the

classical languages, novel scientific fields such as IT or robotics present a new challenge for professionals and proof readers alike.

Translations lead to another problem: does it make sense to translate generally known terms such as “download”, “online” or “relay cable” into national languages? Do translations such as “herunterladen” (German for “to download”) or “prenosni kabel” (Serbian for “relay cable”) promote national language identity or hinder international communication, or possibly both? Who makes a valid translator or proof reader for technical English? Is the “expert of English” required to have an engineering degree as well as advanced knowledge of English? Or can the person be a graduate in the English language and yet not need to have an in-depth knowledge of the technical, technological aspects?

All these are questions that the author has been faced with since the very beginning of her career. As a graduate in English language and literature with teaching qualifications, engineering and computer science were a world away. And yet, very soon upon taking a full time job as a teacher of English at Subotica Tech – College of Applied Sciences, the tasks included translating and proofreading technical English texts. The articles sent to the author came from a wide range of subjects, most that the author had never heard of before: fuzzy mathematics, heat engines, personalization of interactive learning materials, intrusion detection, product management, hexapod robot’s walk algorithms, or fixture-planning systems for box-shaped parts, just to name a few.

Proofreading an English text was the easier part, but translating a text written in Serbian (not the native language of the author) on a heavily technical topic was quite a challenge. Where does one turn to? Printed technical English dictionaries can only do so much since they tend to become outdated at an incredibly rapid rate. The best way to keep up was through online dictionaries and various forums. However, there were countless instances where the dictionary offered several translations for a given word (the word “pontosság” in metrology can be translated both as “precision” or “accuracy”, yet only one of the two, namely “accuracy”, is used). How can a non-engineer know this or make a competent decision?

4 Vajdaság

Subotica Tech is located in Szabadka (Subotica) in the northern part of Vajdaság, Serbia. There are two languages used for teaching at the College, Hungarian and Serbian. It is undoubted that bilingualism has a positive effect on any further learning of a new foreign language and this puts the people from Vajdaság in a peculiar situation. Nevertheless, there is still a strong influence of the mother tongue mainly due to the good (or not so good), largely passive knowledge of English and the lack of day-to-day active language practice, resulting at times in English texts that bear the linguistic structure of either Hungarian or Serbian.

However, it is not only a matter of transforming a Hungarian- or Serbian-influenced English text into correct technical English. Often problems arise due to the unique lingual and geo-political situation of the College and its wider surroundings, Vajdaság. While a large number of people, and specifically employees of Subotica Tech, speak Hungarian as their first language, or are bilingual, this 'local' variant of the Hungarian language is bound to be somewhat distinct from the Hungarian spoken in Hungary. There have been examples when this dialectal differences have been the reason for the rejection of a paper. The writers were told that there were numerous language instances in the paper which were not acceptable in "proper" Hungarian technical language, but are in common use in the technical Hungarian language used in Vajdaság. These instances referred mainly to the use of some English or international terms for which a definite Hungarian translation exists (even though these may sound cumbersome to the ears of vajdasági Hungarians). For example, the expression 'real time' used in a Hungarian text in the context of data processing was frowned upon, and the reviewers demanded the "correct" Hungarian expression, "valós időben", be used instead. Bilingualism may offer an explanation for this phenomenon. As mentioned before, most Hungarian lecturers at Subotica Tech are bilingual and hold their lectures and practices in both languages; thus linguistic transfer is hardly avoidable. Also, the majority of the teaching staff finished their studies in Serbia (or before the disintegration, in former Yugoslavia) where the language of education was Serbian. In addition, the Serbian language is much more relaxed about importing English technical terms and using them in a Serbian language environment. This tendency was evidenced in the vajdasági Hungarian use of the expression "real time".

5 Language Accuracy

In the section below there will be several examples regarding the question of accuracy in the scientific texts that the author has been sent for proofreading. Many of the writers whose works are referred to in this article have focused more on the practical implementation of technical English as opposed to accuracy. During the proofreading process the obvious grammar mistakes are corrected and should the author meet some ambiguous expressions, or where the content is not clear, comments are inserted. Occasionally proofreading is only a first step, followed by a personal consultation regarding the particular meaning that the writer wanted to use in his work.

5.1 Language Transfer

The following example is taken from a journal paper written by one bilingual writer (speaker of Serbian and Hungarian) and one monolingual writer (speaker of

Serbian), both mechanical engineers. The topic of the paper is the description of an adaptive product configurator regarding the thermal insulation of customers' homes taken from [1].

Example 1: "The reason for doing so is that customers usually, based on their belief, **sooner answer (earlier to)** questions that are of higher importance to them than **(to)** questions that are not."

The expression "earlier" is a direct transfer from Serbian as in the expression "potrošači bi ranije odgovarali na ovakva pitanja…" where the word "ranije" means "earlier" in the temporal sense, and not in the comparative sense, as e.g. the word "rather."

5.2 Passive Voice

One typical mistake that is present is almost every English language technical text that the author is given for proofreading is the lack of the use of the Passive Voice. This feature is not entirely surprising, as both the Hungarian language and the Serbian language are a lot less prone to using the Passive Voice than English. In Hungarian and Serbian technical texts the first person plural is a perfectly acceptable form, while English requires the "drier" version of the Passive Voice. All instances below are taken from [2], a paper written by a native Hungarian but bilingual writer for the conference Symposium on Intelligent Systems, SISY 2008 on the topic of e-learning and interactive learning:

Example 2: "**(By a method we mean a) A method involves the** notion of adaptation that can be presented at **(the) a** conceptual level."

Example 3: "**These styles were then grouped (He grouped these styles)** into the "families of learning styles".

Or, in yet another, Example 4: "**(On t)The next picture (we) presents** Peter Brusilovsky's taxonomy of adaptive hypermedia technologies [Brusilovsky, 2001]."

From the proof reader's point of view this means that usually the entire sentences has to be rephrased to comply with the English "requirement" for the Passive Voice. However, in Example 2 it can be seen that a significantly simpler expression ("by a method we mean") was used which was then replaced by a more professional-sounding word ("indicates"). The proof reader's task at times involves less error correction, but rather turning *what* the writer wanted to say into *how* the writer of the text wanted to say it.

Example 5 is quoted from [3] and it presents an instance where the Passive Voice was used with a Serbian sentence structure. The writers are native speakers of Serbian. While one of the writers is bilingual, Serbian is still the first language.

Example 5: "**With the theme of statistical intrusion detection have dealt the authors in publications [1]-[8].**"

which was then corrected according to the English sentence order of the Passive Voice:

"**The authors have dealt with the (theme) topic of statistical intrusion detection (have dealt the authors)** in publications [1]-[8]."

5.3 Technical English vs. Colloquial English

English is undeniably very much present in any science- or IT-oriented person's life; it comes in the form of movies shown in the cinema, songs played on the radio, newsletters subscribed to, etc. Thus it is not always an easy task to discern the English language of popular culture from the English language of the scientific world. This is underlined by Example 6. from [4] shown below, where a grammatical mismatch and an abbreviated form of the auxilliary verb had to be corrected.

Example 6.: On the other hand, obstacles that are illuminated with infrared light **(doesn't) do not** reflect light from **the** visible color spectrum.

5.4 Articles

One of the most common sources of grammatical mistakes is the use of articles. In this field a specific distinction between native speakers of Serbian and native speakers of Hungarian can be determined. The Hungarian language contains both definite and indefinite articles and makes ample use of them. This makes it easier for Hungarian native speakers to "sense" where articles are needed in the English text. (For the sake of argument, an obvious fact will be disregarded, namely that intermediate or advanced speakers of English should *know* and not only *sense* where articles are used.) As opposed to this, Serbian native speakers will leave out the article more often, as it does not exist in the Serbian language. Two examples will lend some support for the statement above:

Example 7: In both cases **the** video chips are sensitive not only to rays from **the** visible spectrum of light, but also to rays from **the** IR spectrum of light. (Serbian native, with every article needed in the text missing, taken from [4].)

Example 8: From the perspective of social constructivism, the function of individual differences on skills, aptitudes and learning preferences could have **an** impact **on** the application of technology in classroom settings. (Hungarian native, taken from [5], where only the indefinite article is missing, which corresponds to the lack of an article in the Hungarian original.)

5.5 Generalization

This section refers to grammar mistakes made by not so advanced users of English who make generalizations based on assumption. This type of language learner behavior becomes less frequent with an increase in language proficiency. However, crucial from a language learning point of view, it shows a degree of independence in the use of the language that will enable the user to develop their language knowledge with less reliance upon a language teacher. The writer of the example presented below is a very independent language learner, having developed most of her skills by herself, relying heavily on the knowledge of fuzzy mathematics and constantly working with English language scientific texts. In this particular case [6] a generalization of noun formation is shown. While the writer must have been aware that many nouns are formed with the suffix -ness, in the given transformation, from the adjective 'uncertain', the suffix –ty is needed.

Example 9: "Let **(we)us** assume that we have T2 fuzzy sets as the rule premise of the rules and as the system input, described respectively by the following equations where the fuzziness represent the **(uncertainness) uncertainty** of T1 fuzzy membership values of these sets."

Conclusion

This article tries to present some of the issues that a proof reader has encountered in a bilingual, Hungarian-Serbian environment within a specific institution of higher education, Subotica Tech. These examples are naturally not meant to make generalizations encompassing all speakers of Serbian and Hungarian, but certainly they support a pattern that English language teachers working in the field of these languages have experienced and that English language proof readers have met with repeatedly. There are constant challenges for proof readers and translators as the technical English language continues to evolve and keep up with technical innovations. On the other hand, it is also important to be able to present one's knowledge on a subject, one's research and contribution to science in their own language, keeping the overwhelming influence of English at bay. The Hungarian as used in Vajdaság may to a certain degree be different from the Hungarian spoken in Hungary, with some transfer from Serbian, the language of the environment. However, while language must be used correctly, it must also be used authentically, as it is understood by its speakers. In this sense, there may well be some instances of English technical terms within a Hungarian text, and there may be international words used within the bounds of Hungarian grammar, but this will make a distinct, vajdasági Hungarian text.

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