

## From L2 communication awareness to L1 text production: Assessing students' acquisition of pragmatic competence in translating texts on the GMO debate

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the ways in which argumentation is dealt with in English and Italian by comparing and contrasting a comparable/parallel corpus of texts on genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Pragmatic discourse strategies are explored in a comparable corpus of GMO texts written by US students and in translations Italian students made as part of a virtual exchange or tele-collaboration project. The project involved students in a US university writing argumentative texts on GMOs and students at an Italian university translating them. Corpus data suggest that – faced with unfamiliar, culturally different arguments about GMOs in US texts – trainee translators had to address issues concerning pragmatics and had to use a cultural filter (House 2006) to produce translations that read like target language originals and met target language expectations.

Keywords: *translation training, pragmatics, tele-collaboration, virtual exchanges*

### Introduction

In Translation Studies, considering translation strategy in terms such as purpose, receiver(s), text type and register has emphasized the pragmatic dimension of context with a focus on intentionality and use of language as action (Hatim & Mason, 1997; Hatim 1998; Mason 1998). Pragmatics in translating is usually meant to establish how equivalence is achieved by reproducing or adapting speech acts with a view to recreating the same perlocutionary effect in the target language and culture. Translators have to observe speech acts systematically, checking that their target texts produce the same response of the readers. A primary concern in scientific and technical translation is producing 'naturally-sounding' texts that read like originals. Consideration of the pragmatically different ways languages go about fulfilling this goal is of paramount importance to achieve good quality translations.

Pragmatic translation equivalence obtains at a global text level by ensuring cohesion of the sequence encoding the perlocution of a speech act and its contribution to the coherence of the whole text (Hatim, 2011: 206). Pragmatic studies of translation also include implicature or the implied meaning readers can make sense of and relay in the

context of situation. Another element that needs considering in translation pragmatics is politeness, which is achieved using different strategies and devices in each language. Finally, a crucial pragmatic factor is relevance or text composition that enables readers to find meaning without unnecessary effort and helps them to confirm or reject assumptions about the text.

Recent approaches to translator training are profession and learner-centred and focus on the development of translator competence. The currently leading approaches – the PACTE group's and Kiraly socio-constructivist approach – differ in the way translator competence is acquired. According to the PACTE group (2011), translator competence can be broken down into five sub-competences: bilingual, extra-linguistic, instrumental and strategic competence, and knowledge about translation. Pragmatic issues are part of the bilingual sub-competence as “Predominantly procedural knowledge required to communicate in two languages. It comprises pragmatic, socio-linguistic, textual, grammatical and lexical knowledge” (PACTE, 2011: 33). Kiraly (2013: 201) criticises this view by stating that

[Models of translation sub-competences] are all static box-like representations of an ideal(ised) relationship between dispositions, abilities and skills that professional translators can be expected to possess and be able to use when translating.

He (Kiraly, 2016) further observes that these sub-competences are actually heuristics with fuzzy boundaries that are all merged together in a kind of whirlpool, where translation projects and personal and interpersonal dispositions lead to the emergence of translator competence as a holistic bundle rather than as a set of atomistic components.

If pragmatic competence as “awareness of textuality and discourse, and textual and discourse conventions in the cultures involved” (Kelly, 2008: 72) is a relevant component of translator competence, how is it acquired? How do trainee translators graduate from knowledge of first language (L1) pragmatics in discourse to L2 communicative pragmatic awareness? This paper investigates pragmatics in translation in a comparable and parallel English/Italian corpus of texts on the debate on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and discusses how a group of trainee translators in a postgraduate course handled persuasive strategies in the English and Italian linguacultures.

## Methods

In pragmatic terms, text types are meant to either monitor or manage a situation, i.e. to provide a fairly straightforward account – as in exposition – or a form of evaluation or direction – as in argumentation and instruction. The relevant text type in this case is argumentation, with a focus on through-argumentation where a thesis is cited to be argued as contrasted with counter-argumentation, where a thesis is presented to be

opposed. A through-argument includes a thesis to be supported, substantiation and conclusion (Hatim, 1997: 36-40).

Research reported in this study draws on collaboration through virtual exchange within the Transatlantic and Pacific Project (TAPP). TAPP is a project set up twenty years ago where (co-)authors write source texts and prepare them for translation, then translators localise the texts to meet the requirements of the target language and culture. TAPP translating is thus an instance of situated learning or “context-dependent approach to translator and interpreter training: learners are exposed to real-life or highly simulated work environments and tasks, both inside and outside the classroom” (Gonzalez-Davies & Enriquez-Raido, 2016).

Given the complexity of the topic, activities for Italian students were divided into two main steps. In step 1, students worked in groups to analyse a comparable English-Italian corpus (approx. 100,000 words per language) and explore contrastively how the GMO debate is reported in the press. They then had to translate into Italian “Crops of the future”, an *Economist* article meant to further heighten their awareness of differences in US and European attitudes to GMOs, namely the more positive attitude towards GMOs in the US as opposed to widespread scepticism in Europe. Throughout the activities, different attitudes to GMOs were discussed in class. Once the translation of *The Economist* article was completed, feedback was given on strategies to relay pragmatics in translation. In step 2 Italian students worked in groups, each translating one out of 16 articles on GMOs written by their US counterparts. Articles were on average 3,500 words long each. Subtopics ranged from GMOs and nutrition to financial aspects of crops to CRISPR applications. Italian students contacted their US partners via email, skype or similar networking systems to discuss issues they encountered in translating the texts. When they had made a first draft of their translation, issues in rendering argumentation were discussed in class so that they could clarify any points with their US partners and produce their final versions. Unfortunately, by the time student translators completed their work their US partners had already finished their courses and only few translators’ groups received final feedback from their US peers.

## Results and discussion

In the process of familiarising with the debate on GMOs in the US and Europe prior to the virtual TAPP exchange translation students read articles on the topic in English and Italian on the web. The different intentionality and presuppositions as pragmatic clues emerging from the corpus were clear. While the US press reported on GMOs in a quite straightforward, positive way, the British and Italian press had to come to terms with the widespread opposition to GMOs and kept citing scientists as authoritative sources to bolster their reports or support their arguments. The British press considered the possibility to discuss growing GM crops, while the Italian one stressed consumers’

opposition and concern about the health risks posed by GMOs. Similar attitudes to GMOs in Britain and Italy ensured that in most cases the pragmatic strategies of argumentation in *The Economist* text chosen for training prior to the virtual exchange could be followed closely to re-create intertextuality and situationality, organising texture in terms of lexical choices, syntax and cohesion, reproducing text structure and balancing informativity. In the following example, cohesion achieved through explicit adversatives – “researchers are focusing instead” and “We however believe that” – is re-created with minimum adjustment of the sentence structures to achieve fluency. To ensure greater effectiveness of the message considering the even more sceptical Italian readership, two different strategies are used compared to the source text. The statement “Examples include” is toned down by using a conditional suggesting probability – “simili usi includerebbero”. “We however believe that the use of CRISPR...” which openly expresses point of view in the source text is re-cast as a possibility introduced by the modal verb ‘potere’ (can) instead of translating ‘believe’ closely as this would weaken the argument (“Tuttavia l’uso della tecnica CRISPR in ambito terapeutico può rappresentare...”):

Currently, researchers are focusing instead on increasing food production, and disease resistance in both crops and animals. One major concern with genetic modification now is if the technology is primarily being used for luxury, or for people who could afford it to improve their lifestyle. Examples include increased muscle mass and/or vision corrections. We however believe that the use of CRISPR in therapeutic settings can be an extremely effective method for eradicating numerous diseases (Cataracts, Muscular Dystrophy, etc.).

Attualmente, invece, i ricercatori lavorano con l’obiettivo di incrementare la produzione alimentare ed aumentare la resistenza alle malattie di piante e animali. Tra principali preoccupazioni suscitate oggi dalle tecniche di modificazione genetica rientra il timore che essa divenga sostanzialmente un lusso, uno strumento per migliorare il proprio stile di vita riservato a chi se lo potrà permettere: simili usi includerebbero l’aumento della massa muscolare e la correzione di difetti visivi. Tuttavia l’uso della tecnica CRISPR in ambito terapeutico può rappresentare un metodo estremamente efficace per debellare numerose malattie quali, ad esempio, cataratta o distrofia muscolare.

Through presupposition – underlying truth taken for granted in text – student translators experienced politeness indirectly. In the US source texts, attitude was explicitly stated, while students had to exercise slight mitigation and hedging to produce target texts that were acceptable in the European debate marked by scepticism about GMOs. This can be seen in the following example, where the huge increase of GMO applications as a measure of GMOs’ usefulness and success in “applications (...) increased tenfold” is toned down through the more generic “i modi (...) sono notevolmente aumentati” and the direct appeal to the reader and positive language in “we ask that you take into consideration our promotion” is rendered through the neutral noun ‘uso’ (instead of the straightforward equivalent ‘promozione’), an impersonal form of the verb (va preso in considerazione) and the downgrading of the clause to a subordinate one in “il cui uso (...) va preso in considerazione (lit. GMOs whose use needs considering)”:

In summary, the applications of genetic modification have already increased tenfold with the discovery of CRISPR. With the potential and wishful ability to benefit people all over the world, we ask that you take into consideration our promotion behind the use of CRISPR in somatic cell modification.

In sintesi, i modi in cui la modificazione genetica può essere utilizzata sono notevolmente aumentati dalla scoperta della tecnologia CRISPR, il cui uso al fine di ottenere modifiche nelle cellule somatiche va preso in considerazione, perché promette di aiutare gli esseri umani in tutto il mondo.

In a continuation of the example above, implicature as expressed through the presence and/or ellipsis of junction is clear in the final part of the paragraph, where “Somatic modification therapy (...) only comes with concerns for rules and regulations” is rendered in a way that is meant to reassure the Italian readers about measures taken to guarantee that the therapy is safe: “Certamente anche la modificazione somatica (...) necessita di norme e regolamenti”. In this part of the source text, cohesion is created by the sequence of sentences. In Italian ellipsis is replaced by addition on junction through sentence-initial ‘tuttavia’. Finally, as can be seen from the example below, through-argumentation in the source text required some adjustments in the target text to achieve a form of composition that would reflect the OGM debate in an Italian context:

Somatic modification therapy however, like all medical regimens, only comes with concerns for rules and regulations that can be smoothed over and understood more with time. The insight for which we have described, is only the tip of the iceberg for what could be coming in the near future. Whether the applications are of in vivo or ex vivo design, choosing CRISPR in somatic cell modification will be a top therapy for the treatment of various diseases.

Certamente anche la modificazione somatica, come qualsiasi terapia, necessita di norme e regolamenti, che potranno essere migliorati nel tempo. Tuttavia, pur essendo solo una piccola parte di quelle che potrebbero essere scoperte in futuro, le applicazioni della terapia genica qui descritte, siano esse *in vivo* o *ex vivo*, renderanno la modificazione somatica con tecnologia CRISPR uno strumento fondamentale per la cura di numerose malattie.

## Conclusions

As trainee translators, students at the Italian university were used to translating argumentation reflecting the dominant European view on GMOs, but had to learn how to deal with culturally different argumentative texts written by US students. Faced with unfamiliar, pragmatically different arguments about GMOs in the second set of texts, trainee translators had to deal with problems in rendering discourse connectives and turning what were often straightforward argumentative US texts into Italian texts where the thesis that GMOs are generally good would normally be cited to be opposed. Moving from translation 1 to translation 2, they became better aware of L2 communication strategies and dealt with pragmatics better in the second set of translations compared to the first one.

In this TAPP project learners were involved in an example of student-centred, situated learning which allows to study the emergence of pragmatic competence in translation. Through exchange with their US partners they became involved in a community of practice, their zone of proximal development was reduced through scaffolding and they graduated from novice to competent translator in a process favouring applied theory and practice. The experience also represented a case of formative assessment as students received constant feedback to develop and acquire translation competence.

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