

Equivalence (?) in Translation: Exploring Timelines

Christine Calfoglou

Hellenic Open University

ckalfog@otenet.gr; ckalfog@yahoo.gr

Abstract: In this paper we present two small sets of ‘comparable bilingual’ and ‘parallel text’ corpora (Bernardini et al. 2003) composed of Greek and English web-based European Union timelines. Drawing on time thematisation in European Union texts (cf. Sidiropoulou 2004) and assuming that, with this temporal anchoring (Chen 2003), timelines in particular may unravel more or less iconically (cf. Calfoglou to appear), we explore opening entry word order patterns in the two languages. The complexity of the image obtained is discussed and differences between the two sets of data are considered in relation to establishing translation equivalence in the genre.

Key words: translation corpora; equivalence; timelines; European Union texts; iconicity

1. Introduction

European Union (henceforth EU) texts have often been referred to as ‘a-typical’ in the sense of tampering with the typical features of the language employed. Sidiropoulou (2004: 89; see also references therein), stresses the “simplification and rationalization” promoted by “standardization in the EU context” while Malkmær talks about these texts being “neither fish nor fowl” (2005: 6) in the sense that they are “each the product of a process of refinement in light of other members of the set, neither of which is classified as a source text or as a translation” (see also Τσούμαρη 2006). It is therefore evident that they pose a particular challenge for the translator, who finds him/herself hovering between a source text that is no source text proper and a target text that may somehow deviate from the typical target language properties.¹

In view of the above, it would be interesting to explore the structure of a specific EU text type and see how the assumed properties of the genre may interact with this ‘standardization’ trend. More specifically, in this paper we will set out to examine word order in the opening entries of EU timelines. We opt for opening entries because we hypothesise that presupposed information is minimal in them and that this could affect the sequencing of information in the clause. Thus, opening timeline entries, with their temporal perspective, may be expected to present us with order patterns reminiscent of full inversion in English in reality conceptualisation terms (cf. Chen 2003). And it may be interesting to see what is licensed in two languages with (at least partially) different word order constraints. In an attempt to research the issue, we will be considering two small sets of ‘comparable bilingual’ and ‘parallel’ corpora (see Bernardini et al. 2003) composed of Greek and English timelines on the Web. In the next section we briefly present the theoretical framework for our analysis, while in section 3 we discuss the method of analysis and section 4 involves a discussion of the data.

¹ As suggested in Τσούμαρη (2006), “the texts resulting from the translation process followed in the EU institutions are considered equally authentic texts; not translations but “language versions”.

2. EU timelines: Experientially iconic?

The timeline genre has been neglected in the literature. Timelines, namely chronological listings of events, may be argued to be closer to chronicles, revolving around their temporal landmark (see Enkvist 1989), and narratives generally, in the obvious sense of telling a story, the narrativisation element once again boosted by the time anchor marking each new entry. In examining history timelines, Calfoglou (to appear) points to the complexity of the genre in word order terms and suggests postulating various forms of motivation underlying the sequencing of constituents. EU timelines, however, may be a rather idiosyncratic case, for, as suggested above, the output in each language is partly a synthesis of outputs in other languages. Yet, it remains a fact that they constitute a non-conventional ‘text’ type in the sense that the date appearing before each entry establishes a new context each time, somehow allowing it to proceed without the constraints of information already established in the reader’s mind in previous entries. It is this very fact that may trigger the iconic arrangement of clause constituents, as will be suggested in what follows.

Iconicity, an essentially Peircean idea (see, among others, Fischer and Nänny 1999 for a discussion), involves the mimesis in language of our conceptualisation of the world around us. In more specific terms and in relation to word order, which is our concern in this paper, (diagrammatic) iconicity relates to the way our perception of experience may be reflected in our arrangement of the constituents in a clause. There may thus be what Enkvist (1981) calls an ‘ordo naturalis’, which is experientially iconic in that it could be argued to reflect experience, or rather, the way and the order in which we experience things, more or less directly (cf. Calfoglou 2010, to appear for a discussion). Experientially iconic orders have often been associated with a fronted location phrase or temporal element (Enkvist 1981, Chen 2003), which makes them particularly tempting in a discussion of order in timelines, with their temporal anchoring. Chen, in particular, refers to the presence of a clause-initial time adverbial licensing an iconic full inversion order in English.² Such sequences are usually interfered with when established information comes into play.

If, then, timelines largely suppress the effects of contextually established information, they may favour ‘fresher’, more experientially iconic orders. One such order may be subject-verb inversion in Greek (Calfoglou 2004, 2010). As this is disallowed in English, however, the time marker not forming an integral part of the opening clause, we might hypothesise an alternative arrangement favouring iconicity. Nominalisation may be one such candidate, since it leaves the ‘subject’/of-phrase last, giving it maximal stress, as is also the case in inversion. Compare (1) and (2) below:

(1) Υιοθετείται το πρόγραμμα Esprit ...

(2) Adoption of the Esprit programme for research in information technology.³

We might also expect other, less directly iconic, order patterns, like the narrative SVO (see Conradie 2001), to compete with the ones proposed above, in accord with the trend observed in history timelines, as recorded in Calfoglou (to appear). Despite the apparent contrast between these forms, as evinced in the focus on the postposed ‘subject’ as against the focus on the activity – the clause-central verb -- in Conradie’s model, it has been suggested (ibid.) that, on closer inspection, if the so-called subject is treated as a

² Chen actually discusses full inversion as a ground-before-figure construction within a Cognitive Grammar perspective but it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider this approach in any more detail.

³ Compare Sidiropoulou (2004: 91) on nominalisations as an identifying feature in Greek as against English EU discourse.

logical object, all three forms may feature a (unifying) VO component, which may also help us to further trace the affinities between languages.

3. The data: Some methodological points

As already noted, we will be looking at two types of data: ‘Comparable bilingual’, that is “originals in two languages, selected according to analogous criteria such as topic and text type” (Bernardini et al. 2003: 5), and ‘parallel’, namely “originals and their translations”, also often referred to in the literature as ‘translational’ (ibid.: ft.2). This may allow us to draw safer conclusions, as we will be able to see interlanguage effects more clearly at work in the ‘parallel’ corpus. On the other hand, the importance of studying ‘comparable bilingual’ corpora for translators cannot be overestimated (see, e.g., Williams 2006).

Our ‘comparable bilingual’ data is a ca 5000 word corpus for each of the two languages, while the ‘parallel’ corpus is composed of about 3000 words in each language; 159 entries in the Greek ‘comparable’ set as against 184 in its English counterpart and 130 entries for each language in the ‘parallel’ set. Because of the differences in the number of entries and, as a result, of the tokens analysed in each case, we followed Biber’s (1988) advice regarding frequency normalisation. We thus normalised our frequency counts to a 100-entry text length.⁴

4. The data: Presentation and discussion

The order patterns obtained were pretty varied and ranged from inversion (VS) to nominalisation, SVO, noun phrases in verbless clauses (NP) and unaccusatives involving either SV or a passive with or without an agent phrase, codified as SV(pass)(AgP). Examples follow:

(3) Υπογράφονται στις Βρυξέλλες το Πρόσθετο Πρωτόκολλο και το Δεύτερο Χρηματοδοτικό Πρωτόκολλο (VS)

(4a) Ίδρυση του Συμβουλίου της Ευρώπης (nominalisation)

(4b) Entry into force of the Community system of short-term monetary support (nominalisation)

(5a) Το Συμβούλιο των Υπουργών της ΕΕ υιοθετεί συνεργασία προσχώρησης ΕΕ-Τουρκίας (SVO)

(5b) The Six sign the Treaty establishing the European Defence Community (EDC) (SVO)

(6a) Ευρωπαϊκό Συμβούλιο του Λάακεν (NP)

(6b) Round of negotiations (NP)

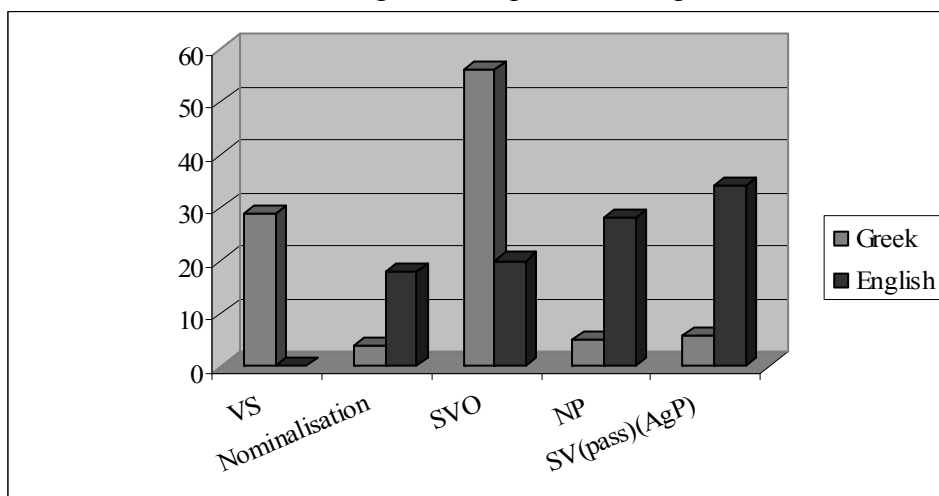
(7a) Το Ευρωπαϊκό Σύνταγμα υπογράφεται στη Ρώμη (SV(pass))

(7b) A plan for the European Political Community (EPC) is published. (SV(pass)).

As we can see in Figure 1 below, our hypothesis regarding an increased occurrence of – iconic – postverbal subject orders was only partially confirmed in the Greek data. Thus, inversion reached 29% of the entry tokens, which is quite robust as such but relatively weak if compared to the 56% of its SVO counterpart. All other order patterns were only peripherally relevant:

⁴ Biber refers to text length as such but, because the crucial determinant in our case was the number of entries, not the number of words, we adapted things accordingly.

Figure 1. Normalised frequency means (per 100 entries) for word order patterns obtained in Greek and English ‘comparable bilingual’ EU timelines



On the other hand, in the English ‘comparable bilingual’ corpus, where VS is illicit, nominalisation was substantial, amounting to an 18% of the token total, but, still, it cannot be said to fill the space taken up by inversion instances in the Greek data. Interestingly, however, we got high frequencies for NPs and unaccusative or passive sequences, which amounted to 28% and 34% respectively. As has already been suggested in relation to history timelines (Calfoglou to appear), NPs may also be argued to be iconic if an underlying clause-initial generic verb like ‘έγινε’ or ‘(there) occurred’ is hypothesised. Passives seem to be a less readily explicable case, however. On the one hand, they may be non-iconic (see *ibid.* for a discussion) in that they involve agent demotion but, on the other, following Birner & Ward’s (1998) argument, they could be iconic, and thus similar to inversion, in the sense that preverbal material cannot be less familiar than postverbal. Further data is needed for the issue to be resolved but, in any case, it is also important to note that, along with the majority of passives, which are non-iconic, as illustrated in examples (7a) and (7b) above, and the somewhat ‘counterintuitive’ cases with lengthy subjects, as in (8) below:

(8) Ways of implementing the Action Plan and the possibility of opening an EU Documentation Center in Kyiv were discussed,

there are also instances of apparently iconic passives, as in

(9) The fifth meeting of the EU-Ukraine Cooperation Committee was held in Brussels, where the clause-final location phrase may be focal, so the sentence may be said to evolve from the less to the more unfamiliar.

That no straightforward iconicity-related conclusions can be drawn from the data analysed is further reinforced by the fact that the iconicity of the entry seemed to be dependent on the presence of other constituents. Thus, along with strongly iconic sequences like (10) below:

(10) Accession of the first State from the former Soviet Block: Hungary,

we also got entries like

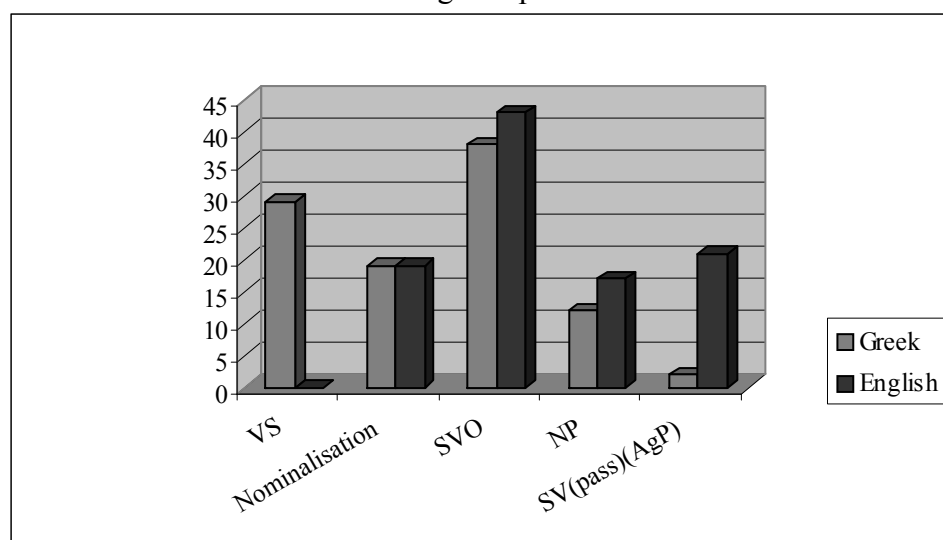
(11) Extension of the PCA to the enlarged European Union,

where the prepositional phrase seems to attract more attention than the ‘of-phrase’. ‘The PCA’ is in this case treated as presupposed information, as also suggested by its definiteness marker, even though it may not have been introduced before.

The robustness of SVOs in the Greek corpus, as against their relatively weak presence in the English ‘comparable’ data, diverges a lot from the pattern obtained for history timelines, where SVO was particularly dominant in the English sample. Though the issue merits further research, this may further testify to the idiosyncratic nature of EU timelines (and EU texts generally). On the other hand, if the hypothesis advanced in section 2 concerning the affinities between inversion, nominalisation and SVO is extended to NPs, too, in the sense that they, too, may constitute no logical subjects proper, the overall percentage obtained for (logical) VO in both languages is very high indeed. In that sense, translators may particularly need to become aware of order motivation and possibilities in the genre before they engage in the act of producing ‘equivalent’ texts.

Let us now have a look at our ‘parallel’ corpus. As we can see in Figure 2, the differences observed between the order patterns in each of the two languages in our first corpus are more or less gone. Nominalisations are evenly shared between Greek and English and this is also more or less the case with SVO and NPs. The only truly persistent difference is the one in relation to inversion, generally disallowed in English, and preverbal subject passives, rather counterintuitive in Greek, where inverted passive subjects, as in example (3) above, are most readily available:

Figure 2. Normalised frequency means (per 100 entries) for word order patterns obtained in Greek and English ‘parallel’ EU timeline texts



It appears, then, that ‘parallel’ data need to be consulted with caution, as they seem to blunt interlanguage differences observed in ‘comparable’ data. It would be necessary to research the issue further, with the help of an enlarged corpus, before deciding whether nominalisation or NP, for instance, are to be opted for so readily in the Greek target

text. Similarly, the rise in SVOs in the English sample would need to be further explored and agentivity issues may also need to be considered.⁵

5. Conclusion

EU timelines seem to be a rather ‘fuzzy’ genre, with a number of angles left unaccounted for by a straightforwardly iconic account. It appears that a number of alternative iconic options are made use of besides the ones initially hypothesised. Among other things, this may be related to the fact that timelines may not be entirely free of presuppositions, as was initially assumed. Equivalence in timeline translation therefore becomes a highly elusive issue. On the other hand, ‘parallel’ data are useful in pointing to elements of convergence in the two languages while ‘comparable bilingual’ corpora need to be extensively made use of to illustrate ‘typicality’. A comparison between this and other EU genres as well as between this and other types of timelines would further help prioritise the translator’s concerns.

References

- Bernardini, S., D. Stewart and F. Zanettin (2003). “Corpora in Translator Education: An Introduction”. In F. Zanettin, S. Bernardini and D. Stewart (eds), *Corpora in Translator Education*. Manchester & Northampton MA: St. Jerome Publishing, 1-14.
- Biber, D. (1988). *Variation across speech and writing*. Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Birner, B. and G. Ward (1998). *Information Status and Noncanonical Word Order in English*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Calfoglou, C. (2004). “The ‘peripheral’ gains dominance: Verb-subject order in poetry”. In Ch. Dokou, E. Mitsi and B. Mitsikopoulou (eds), *The periphery viewing the world. Selected Papers from the fourth international conference of the Hellenic Association for the Study of English*. Athens: Parousia, 226-236.
- Calfoglou, C. (2010) “An optimality approach to the translation of poetry”. In A. Fawcett, K.L. Guadarrama García and R. Hyde-Parker (eds), *Translation: Theory and Practice in Dialogue*. London: Continuum Press, 85-106.
- Calfoglou, C. (to appear). “Translating history timelines or ‘negotiating-in-iconicity’”. *Synthèses*, 3.
- Chen, R. (2003). *English inversion: A ground-before-figure construction*. Berlin, NY: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Conradie, J. (2001). “Structural iconicity: The English s- and of-genitive”. In M. Nänny and O. Fischer (eds), *The Motivated Sign*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 229-247.
- Enkvist, N. E. (1981). “Experiential iconicism in text strategy”. *Text* 1, (1): 77-111.
- Enkvist, N. E. (1989). “Connexity, Interpretability, Universes of Discourse, and Text Worlds”. In S. Allen (ed.), *Possible Worlds in Humanities, Arts and Sciences*. Berlin, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 162-186.
- Fischer, O. and M. Nänny (1999). “Iconicity as a creative force in language use”. In M. Nänny and O. Fischer (eds), *Form Miming Meaning*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins, xv-xxxvi.
- Malkmør, K. (2005). “Translation and Linguistics”. *Perspectives*, Vol. 13, No.1: 5-20.
- Sidiropoulou, M. (2004). *Linguistic Identities through Translation*. Amsterdam, NY: Rodopi.
- Τσούμαρη, Μ. (2006). «Η μετάφραση κειμένων της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης στο πλαίσιο της Θεωρίας της Συνάφειας». Πρακτικά της 1^{ης} Συνάντησης Ελλήνων Μεταφρασεολόγων, ΑΠΘ, Θεσσαλονίκη.
- Williams, I. (2006). “Towards a target-oriented model for quantitative contrastive analysis in translation studies”, *Languages in Contrast* 6:1, 1-45.

⁵ Might it be the case, for instance, that agentive subjects tend to underlie SVO sequencing? A preliminary analysis of the cases attested indicates that the image is rather blurred but more systematic analysis is needed.