Translation of the sentence-initial direct object from German to English and its potential effects on the semantics of a sentence

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Fillmore's frame semantics theory was adopted by translation scholars already during the 1980s and in later works as a means of basing translation decisions on (e.g. Vannerem and Snell-Hornby 1986; Kußmaul 2010). According to the proposed strategy, the task of the translator is to find the appropriate frame in a target culture and the linguistic realization depending on the chosen source frame. Using (frame) semantic description with translations fits well with one of the main aspects of translation: Translation can generally be seen a task where the meaning of the original should be preserved as far as possible (e.g. Kade 1968). However, differences in the constructions (e.g. Goldberg 1995) available to a speaker in the target language may constrain the rendering of a source language message in the target language. In order to test and refine the "frame semantics" translation strategy proposed, understanding whether and how constraints such as constructional constraints can alter the semantics of the target message is important.

This talk operationalises the preservation of meaning by means of the "primacy of frame"-hypothesis: Ideally, the semantic frame (e.g. Fillmore 1985; Petruck 1996) of the original is maximally matched by the frame of the translation; in other words, no other frame in the target language would match the frame of the original better in the given context and for the given purpose of the translation. The work presented here investigates one factor overriding this principle in translations between English in German: One grammatical construction is under investigation, namely object topicalisation in German (i.e. objects in sentence initial position), a construction which is not commonly used in English. Picking a construction comparable not so much in form but in communicative function in the target language may lead to frame shifts, as in the following example (frames evoked by the main verb indicated in capitals in parentheses):

(1)   Source: Die Frauen hat das nicht gerade zimperlich gemacht. (CAUSE_CHANGE)
        Lit.:   `The  women  has that  not  exactly  prudes      made`
        Target: The women weren't exactly prudes. (STATE_OF_ENTITY)

In this case, the sentence-initial direct object in German became a subject in the English translation, thus keeping the word order. The English subject-verb-object construction chosen by the translator is comparable to the German object topicalisation construction with regard to keeping the focus position of the element *The women*. The main verb of the sentence was accommodated to fit the new configuration of grammatical functions: From a causative in the original with `make` to a state in the translation with be as main verb.

The pilot study presented here uses 51 sentence pairs from the parallel part of the German-English/English-German CroCo corpus (Hansen-Schirra et al. 2012), about 3% of the German-English parallel subcorpus. It is restricted to cases in which the direct object is the very first component of the sentence, without leading adverbials or connectors (*aber* 'but', *glücklicherweise* 'luckily', …), in order to minimise effects of constructional interplay.

The parallel part of the CroCo corpus is made up of eight registers, each containing around 32.000 tokens for each language in both translation directions. Including two monolingual subcorpora of English and German, it is about 1 million tokens in size. The registers span from political essays to fictional texts to business communication. It contains rich annotation and alignment: It is annotated on word level with parts of speech, lemmata, chunk, grammatical function as well as clause and sentence segmentation and it is aligned on word, clause and sentence level. This rich annotation allows for automatic query of examples such as above. The examples were analysed with respect to construction and frame choice in the target language compared with that of the source language. The results reveal a range of variation in choosing adequate constructions in the target language, such as re-ordering the components (i.e. simply switching the places of object and subject), shifting grammatical functions (i.e. making the object the subject and vice versa) or clefting, some of which lead to frame shifts as in example (1).

The results show a preference for translators to re-instate the canonical subject-verb-object order, either by switching components or by shifting grammatical functions. The former option can result in a loss of focus for the element focussed in German; part of the translation decision is, thus, whether to keep the attention focussing function of the construction in the original. Altogether, alternative options like clefting or object topicalisation, often keeping the focus found in the original or even strengthening it, also make up a substantial part of the possible strategies found in the corpus. I will propose potential factors for choosing a variant over another for target production, e.g. attention focus preservation or adherence to target language norms.

In addition to highlighting the interplay between construction and frame choice, I will present analyses of individual examples of frame shifts in which the frames of the original and the translation can often be easily linked with each other by exploiting frame-to-frame relations encoded in FrameNet, a database of English frames (Fillmore et al. 2003). The assumption for this is that for very "basic" frame-to-frame relations, i.e. in domains that are not culturally (heavily) loaded, the relations should be cross-linguistically applicable, at least in the case of English and German. This raises, of course, a number of research questions which cannot be answered in this contribution, but are a matter of future research.

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