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JOURNAL OF MODERN SCIENCE TOM 2/29/2016, S. 347–362

On the development of translation strategies in rendering of legal texts

Abstract

Author in the paper follows the development of legal translation and related translation strategies from ancient times to the early 20th century. She emphasizes the role that this field of translation plays as a means of communication in national, transnational and international law.

Keywords: *legal documents, translation, law, legal translation in history*

Introduction

Despite the fact that the translation of legal documents belong among the oldest and most important in the world, legal translation has been neglected in translation studies and studies in the field of law. Instead the recognition of legal translation as a separate discipline, this has been considered by translation theorists only as one of the branches of professional translation, translation studies subject, often marginalized for his alleged "inferiority" (Šarčević, 2000: 1). Even more startling fact is the low attention given to legal translation from representatives of the legal profession, though it is in today's world that this area of translation plays an important role as a means of communication at national, transnational and international law.

Being aware of the potential to cause conflicts threatening peace literally as a result of an incorrect translation, Kuner (1991: 953) notes that "the growing trend toward providing authentic texts of treaties in four or more languages poses dangers to the peace and stability of the international order".

Nevertheless, in recent years a growing interest in the theory of translation of technical and particularly legal texts, as one of the types of special-purpose text and related translation procedures, since views on translation of legal texts are different also at present, as different were ways of translation in various historical periods. Also due to this, we would like to highlight the development that these opinions and legal translation passed.

Legal translation in history

According to Šarčević (2000: 23), only since 16th century a more comprehensive view on the development of legal translation has been provided, for example, in the writings of Martin Luther work *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen* of 1530, Pierre Daniel Huet *De optimo genere interpretande* of 1680 or Alexander Fraser Tytler *Essay on the Principle of Translation* of 1791.

However, despite the fact that translation of "the book of books" – the Bible is often regarded as the oldest translation[1], legal translation has a much longer tradition. The oldest surviving evidence of legal translation dates back to the Egyptian-Hittite wars and it is the translation of the *Hittite-Egyptian Peace Treaty* of 1271 B.C. Two versions of the contract were discovered, one in the form of hieroglyphic inscriptions discovered in several Egyptian temples and the other version, written in cuneiform on clay tablets, discovered in the Hittite capital Hattusa (*Boğazköy*, today Boğazkale). Despite the fact that the original contract was never found, according to Hilf (1973: 5), scientists believe that these are translations.

For more than 2,000 years the general theory of translation was dominated by the debate on whether translation is to be literal or free (Steiner, 1977: 239). Due to the "sensitive" nature of legal texts, this issue is particularly controversial in legal translation, since legal issues are concerned. Given that the legal and religious texts are prescriptive, it is not surprising that the early history of legal translation is most often associated with the literal translation

of the Bible until the Middle Ages, when there was a slight deviation from the literal translation, and the Bible was translated into vernacular languages using 'moderately literal translation", coming as a third in the table by Šarčević, which illustrates development of the translation from the strict literal to co-drafting (thanks to the new methods of bilingual drafting in Canada – see Šarčević, 2000):

Figure 1
Phases in the Development of Legal Translation (Šarčević, 2000, s. 24)

strict literal ⟶ literal ⟶ moderately literal ⟶ near idiomatic
idiomatic co-drafting

Due to the authoritative, binding nature of legal texts, legal translation remained under the influence of a literal translation a lot longer than other areas of translation. The first incentive to move away from a literal translation occurred as late as in 20th century, when the translators of less used official languages began to demand equal language rights and thus pave the way for the development from literal to near idiomatic and idiomatic translation. Thus, according to the above table, the development of translation begins with strict literal translation and moving to idiomatic translation and thanks to new methods of bilingual drafting laws in Canada ends up with co-drafting, a cooperation between the experts in the area of law and translatology in law-making.

Multilingual communication within the area of law has a long and varied history. Not only the legal systems of the Western world have their roots in Roman law, but even translation activity during the reign of Emperor Justinian left its mark on the history of legal translation. Therefore, we begin our historical overview with the area of Roman law.

Probably the oldest known, governed by statute, rule for the translation of legislative texts is a directive of the emperor Justinian in his collection of laws *Corpus juris civilis*[2] of the 6th century. To maintain the letter of the law, the directive expressly authorizes only translations into Greek, and even the Latin text must be reproduced word for word as evidenced by the following fragment:

> *„Imperator Caesar Flavius Iustinianus… Augustus ad senatum et omnes populos… nemo neque eorum, qui in praesenti iuris peritiam habent, nec qui postea fuerint, audeat commentarios isdem legibus adnectere, nisi tantum si velit eas in Graecam vocem transformare sub eodem ordine eaque consequentia, sub qua et voces Romanae positiae sunt, hoc quod Graeci dicunt" (§ 21 Constitutio Tanta [*Introductory Act to the *Digest]).*

In translation word-for-word, the words of the source text are translated literally into the target language and even grammatical forms and word order of the source language are preserved. Word-for-word translation is basically a strict literal translation as opposed to literal translation. Also in the literal translation the basic unit of translation is a word, but some grammatical changes are here allowed, for example in syntax, with respect to the target language and in the interest of clarity, while the translator follows the source language as closely as possible (Wills, 1977; in Šarčević, 2000: 25).

The literal translation applied in the work of Emperor Justinian was influenced by the way how the religious texts are translated, as in the early period of Christianity the Roman state recognized Church authority and vice versa, Church recognized the subordination of Christian emperors, and as it was necessary to translate literally the word of God into another language, also the enactments issued by the Emperor had to be translated literally, as the word of God and of the Emperor were considered sacred. Also, the Bible as well as legislative texts were attributed a certain mysteriousness, which meant that they contained the truth that should not be understood only by reason but by faith (Werk, 1993: 18). Therefore, it was believed that such "power of a word" of the given texts can only be maintained by applying word-for-word translation. This results from Hieronymus´ warning in his letter to Pammachius: "Absque Scripturis sanctis, ubi et veraborum ordo mysterium est" (*De optimo genere interpretandi*, cited in Kloepfer 1967: 28, also Vermeer, 1992b: 93). According to Wölfflin (1894: 82–83), early translations of the Bible from Greek into Latin were characterized by an excess of etymological equivalents of the Greek words used without regard to context. This has resulted in a large number of words, so-called false friends, or as stated by Wölfflin, a large number of Latin words with the same root as the Greek word of the source language, but with a different meaning.

During the early Middle Ages, within the territory of Western Europe we are faced with the remains of Roman law as a result of nearly 400 years of Romanisation that was, inter alia, ended by dominating of the Western Roman Empire by Germanic tribes. These remains were preserved mainly as customs and habits, but thanks to the Roman Catholic Church the canon law and the culture of the Roman Empire continued existing, together with the Latin language. In this period national languages have not yet been formulated into a written form and therefore the legal documents and instruments were recorded in Latin. For instance in Germany there was no uniform spoken nor written language. Given that not all legislators and judges were proficient in Latin, legislative process and judicial proceedings could not do without translation.

According to Philipp Heck (1931), a legal historian, the rule for medieval translators of legislative texts was the application of strict literal translation. Heck in his work *Übersetzungsprobleme in frühen Mittelalter* of 1931 mentions the frequent occurrence of ad hoc translations, i.e. instant translation without preparation, made during the adoption or revision of a particular law but also during decision-making in the case. This applied both to written translation and interpretation. For instance, between the 5th – 9th centuries, the laws of the various Germanic tribes (e.g. *lex Salica, lex Alamanorum* or *lex Baiuvariorum*) were formulated only in the Germanic vernacular and immediately recorded in Latin by clerics. To avoid the need for the legislators to sit for a second time, they verified these Latin texts with their signature right on the spot, which did not provide the space for an interpreter to revise their literal translation, and once the law was "on the paper" no revision was possible as a result of which mistranslations were frequent (1931: 7). Since the law was written in Latin, during the court proceedings it was necessary to translate relevant parts of the Latin text again into the Germanic language and this "back translation" was, according to Heck, conducted primarily because of the judges and not the parties to the action. At the end of the proceedings the judgment was given orally in Germanic language and recorded by an interpreter in Latin (Heck, 1931: 4–19; in Šarčević, 2000: 26).

Heck describes the Latin target texts as literal ("word-for-word") translations where Germanic words of the target language were simply replaced the Latin "equivalents" regardless of contextual and textual coherence. Heck called this

method of translation as "equivalent method" and the relationship between the source language term and its equivalent as "equivalence". He also notes that the use of an equivalent method meant applying etymological equivalents, which resulted in a significant number of errors due to polysemy, what he calls "multiple equivalence". Heck attributed the poor quality of translation in particular to the fact that translators or interpreters were clerics, without a legal education and so ignorant of legal terms, they translated words in isolation, without context. Similarly, since the translations had to be carried out immediately, the clerics did not have time to think in the target language and formulate the text in good Latin.

In such a case, Heck advocates the use of literal translation, as it was necessary to maintain the letter of the law in Latin in order to correctly reproduce it in its back translation into a Germanic language. Nevertheless, Heck admits that the back translation conducted during the court session was often wrong and thus causing a conflict between the written law and its application, but despite the inevitable errors he emphasizes the use of an equivalent translation method. He believes that if freer methods of translation were used, even greater discrepancy between the translation and the original would occur. Even more important is his recognition that an equivalent method was used in the glosses, which served as an aid in the translation. Original glosses were explanations of complicated words or phrases written on the margin, or above the individual words of the Latin text. According to Šarčević (2000: 27), glosses provided by Heck contain passages of Latin texts with glosses in the old German on the margins to explain technical terms. They also served as corpus for medieval "vocabularies" (glossaries) which were basically lists of Latin terms and their equivalents generated from glosses on the margins of the documents. As confirmed by Heck (1931: 20), the literal translation was recognized method for creating such lists and dictionaries.

"By the Wycliffe´s translation of the Bible into English in the early 14th century the Latin monopoly of the Church in England was weakened. However, an opposition to legal Latin grew up long after the separation of England from the Roman Church, which was due to the existence of legal French (Anglo-Norman law) and a belief that it was better to have Latin writs rather than unintelligible French ones" (Mellinkoff, 1963: 82, in Šarčević,

2000: 28). Although the English courts have never adopted Roman law, Latin became the dominant written language of the law after the Norman conquest of England in 1066. The English have always tried to achieve a comprehensible legal language and in 1527 John Rastelli issued the first Latin-English glossary of legal terms, which was to facilitate clarity of Latin legal texts. Also, there was a language reform (Commonwealth language reform (1649–1660), which was directed to the establishment of English as the sole language used in law. The largest expansion of legal translation occurred in the seventeenth century, which was to a large extend ended by a new „*English-for-lawyers law*" adopted in 1731. Although formally speaking the language reform met its goal, the original intention to make legal language available to the general public was not achieved. To a large extent this was due to the poor quality of the translation of legal texts into English due to strict literal translation. In the words of the English legal historian, „the word-for-word translations of law French documents were «difficult and obscure»" (Collas, 1953: xiv).

Even worse quality of translation had legal translations from Latin, due to the fact that English is an analytic language, dependent on a word order, while Latin is inflected language. Even now the view is adopted that strict literal translation is possible only if the source and target languages are grammatically close and even then the real success is rare (Wills, 1977: 104; Larson, 1984: 10). Legal texts translated from Latin were full of pronouns, prepositions, auxiliary verbs in which it was difficult to make sense and, therefore, as confirmed by Blackstone in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–1769), such translations failed to contribute to the success of the reform:

> „*This was done, in order that the common people might have knowledge and understanding of what was alleged or done for and against them in the process and pleadings, the judgment and entries in a cause. Which purpose I know not how well it has answered, but I am apt to suspect that the people are now, after many years´ experience, altogether as ignorant in matters of law as before*" (ibid.: 135).

Also, in other European countries was the dominance of Latin gradually ended, but much later, due to the adoption of Roman law. As in England,

even in Italy, France and Germany there was a language reform. Despite the fact that in Germany there were efforts to repeal legal Latin, for instance by first translations of the *Sachsenspiegel* into German at the beginning of the 13th century, as well as by other legal instruments adopted in Latin and German, with the onset of the Renaissance, and in particular by the adoption of Roman law (*gemeine Recht*) Latin as the language of law was established again, by the document *Reichskammergerichtsordnung* of 1495.

In order to limit the influence of the Latin, and make the Bible available to the German wide public, Martin Luther carried out his monumental translations of the New and Old Testaments (1521, 1534) and in order to imitate the language of ordinary people, his translation is rather free. According to Šarčević (2000: 30), Luther's translations meant the end of the parallel development of biblical and legislative texts translation. She also states that in the spirit of the Reformation Sebastian Brant originally tried to create translation work similar to the one by M. Luther and started translating the *Corpus Juris Civilis* into German. However, this attempt was declared by other lawyers legal dilettantism and a "foolish act" for a lawyer. In Wieacker´s words (1952: 90), „this was the plan of a dilettante who did not realize that, unlike the Bible, *Corpus juris* was not literature for ordinary people".

For example in France, in the early 16th century, started a movement for the use of French as the language of legislation, administration and judiciary. The primary means of achieving the objectives of the language reform was the translation, to reduce the number and complexity of the explanations made available to the public right and to ensure greater clarity and thereby reduce the number of lawsuits and the amount of interpretative errors by judges (Didier, 1990: 7).

Despite the fact that Latin was maintained during the Middle Ages as the dominant language of international law and remained the main language of diplomacy until being threatened by the mentioned linguistic reforms, with the increase of the importance of French literature and art, the French language acquired such prestige and recognition that it was adopted by the European Court and began to be used by diplomats at international conferences and international agreements (Hardy, 1962: 72).

Šarčević (2000: 30) states that the struggle for identity of national languages had a downstream impact on translation. In the 17th century, Pierre Daniel Huet rejected strict literal translation as "primitive", claiming that the literal translation does not require any intellect on the part of the translator. In his view, the translator must take into account the basic rules of grammar and syntax of the target language, but at the same time not to be "unfaithful" to the source text by producing free translation. Huet advocated a "refined" form of literal translation in which the words are translated in context, not in isolation. Although Huet was primarily concerned with literary translation, a shift from strict literal translation to literal translation was also necessary in legal texts.

Translation of legal texts also acquired importance in the period of the Enlightenment, which was connected with the effort of individual European states to codify the laws of their states. For instance, Prussian King Frederick II ordered his chancellor Cocceji to cancel the Roman codes in Latin and issue new Prussian *Landrecht* in German. According to Hattenhauer (1987: 40), the main motive of law germanising was not to create code that would be understood by the general public, but rather to facilitate the work of judges and thus facilitate a uniform interpretation of the law. According to Šarčević (2000: 31), to create a code in English, most of which was a translation from Latin and which included the Roman concepts, has proved an Achilles heel of the legislative reform. Before Cocceji a problem appeared of expressing of the terms in underdeveloped language that could have been solved in three ways: a) to borrow or naturalize terms of the source language into the target language, b) to use neutral terms to express concepts, or c) to create neologisms in the target language. Cocceji decided to use Latin borrowings, followed by explanatory notes in German. As he further states, for example, the term *de patria potestate* was summarized into the relative clause, which was composed of 14 words, 3 in Latin. In Part I of the work *Project des Corporis Juris Fridericiani* (1749) Cocceji argued that lawyers are accustomed to such terms and the introduction of other would cause confusion among lawyers and judges. According to Hattenhauer (1987), Cocceji had to admit its failure, caused by a lack of language skills required for such a task and the work *Allgemeines Landrechts für die Preußischen Staaten* was completed only in 1794, thus 18 years after the death of Frederick the Great.

In the period of the Enlightenment also the French Emperor Napoleon recognized the right of the people to use their own national language. One of his most significant acts was the codification of civil law, which laid the lasting foundations of France´s civil institutions. Napoleon insisted that the *Code civil* of 1804, later known as the *Code Napoléon* was adopted in all the subjugated territories, and thus throughout his reign the legal translation in importance. These newly acquired territories were authorised to establish and verify their own translations of the Civil Code and created several original texts in German, which were in force in the relevant jurisdictions. Šarčević (2000: 32) provides a comparison of the French source text and two German translations (one in force in the Grand Duchy of Berg, the second in Baden-Württemberg), which proves that the literal translation has finally become a recognized method of translation of legislative texts (Höhn, 2011: 230). These texts, produced independently, are slightly different because of the basic rules of the target language syntax, nevertheless, they adhere to the original language as carefully as possible. This is documented by article 1014 provided in the original version, followed by the two German translations:

> *De legs particuliers.*
> *Tout legs pur et simple donnera au légataire, du jour du décès du testateur, un droit à la chose léguée, droit transmissible á ses héritiers on ayant-cause. Néaumoins le légataire particulier ne pourra se mettre en possession de la chose léguée, ni en prétendre les fruits ou intérêts, qu´à compter du jour des sa demande en délivrance, formée suivant l´ordre établili par l´article 1011, ou du jour auquel cette déliverance lui auroit été volontairement consentie.*

Nemecký text A (Berg):

> *Von den Particularvermächtnissen.*
> *Jedes unbedingte Vermächtniß gibt dem Legatar von dem Todestage des Testators an, auf die vermachte Sache ein auf seine Erben oder Nachfolger übergehendes Recht. Dessen ungeachtet kann der Particularlegatar nicht eher sich in den Besitz der vermachten Sache setzen, oder auf deren Früchten oder Zinsen Anspruch machen, also von dem Tage an, wo er entweder, nach der im 1011 ten Artikel bestimmten Ordnung, das Gesuch um Auslieferung angebracht hat, oder wo ihm diese Auslieferung freyweillig zugesagt wurde.*

Nemecký text B (Baden):

> *Von Stückvermächtnissen.*
> *Jedes unbedingte Vermächtnis gibt dem Vermächtnisnehmer von dem Tag an, da der Erblasser gestorben ist, ein Eigentum auf die vermachte Sache, das auf seine Erben oder Rechtsfolger übergeht. Der Erbstücknehmer kann jedoch weder den Besitz der vermachten Sache früher ergreifen, noch auf deren Früchte oder Zinsen Anspruch machen, also von dem Tag an, wo er das Gesuch um Auslieferung nach der Ordnung des 1011 ten Satzen angebracht hat, oder wo ihm eine solche freiwillig zugesagt worden ist. (texty cit. in Kaufmann, 1984, in Šarčević, 2000, s.* 33)

Šarčević (2000: 32), comments translation solutions into German and evaluates them as far as syntax is concerned that both translations read like a source text, text B slightly better than text A. The use of compositum *Todestage des Testators* and the participial phrase *auf die Sache vermachte ein oder auf seine Erben Nachfolger übergehendes Recht* in text A (first sentence) make it more fluent that the wordy clauses in text B. The basic structure of the second sentence of the French text (negation + que) is maintained in both translations, despite their unnatural wording in German. This is consistent with the assumption that unnecessary changes in the syntax may jeopardize the thought pattern of the original. Both translators endeavoured to reproduce all the words of the French text, recognizing the importance of preserving the letter of the law. The most notable difference between the two German texts concerns terminology. While the term *droit* (first sentence) is translated literally as *Recht* in text A, the translator of text B used the more accurate term *Eigentum*.

Also technical terms of Roman law in text B are replaced by German equivalents, while the translator of text A imitates the French terms using naturalization. To compare the said, Šarčević (2000: 33) provides the following

Table:

French source text	**German text A**	**German text B**
legataire	Legatar	Vermächtnisnehmer
testateur	Testator	Erblasser
legataire particulier	Particularlegatar	Erbstücknehmer

By germanising the terms of Roman law, translator B seeks to establish adequate technical terms in German language and avoids borrowings and naturalizations throughout the whole text. Künssberg (1930: 18) attaches great importance to this achievement, since it contributes to the development of German legal language and, perhaps more importantly, covers the unpleasant fact that the Code is a foreign legal document which is intended to implement the will of the conqueror over the conquered, thus predicts a new national consciousness, which inevitably influenced the development of legal translation.

Legal translation continued to flourish also in the 19th century due to the fact that after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, Austria became one of the great powers in Europe.[3] Metternich in order to avoid demonstrations of nationalism, imposed Austrian law to all of its territories, but allowed individual nationalities retain their official languages. The most striking achievement in the field of translation was the translation of the Austrian Civil Code of 1811 (*Allgemeines Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch* – ABGB) into ten languages: Czech, Croatian, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Russian, Romanian, Serbian, Slovenian and even Latin. Under a law adopted in 1849, all the texts were considered equally authentic. This meant that the courts of the states of the non-German-speaking territories were allowed to apply the authenticated translation in their own language, using the German version only in the case of ambiguity or contradiction. In order to harmonize legal terminology in different official languages and to assist in the uniform interpretation and application of parallel texts, a group of legal and linguistic experts compiled several multilingual legal dictionaries. For instance, the first edition of the dictionary containing the legal terms of the German , Czech , Polish , Russian , Slovenian and Serbian language entitled *Juridisch-politische Terminologie für die slawischen Sprachen Österreichs* was published in Vienna in 1850 (Šarčević, 2000: 35). Štefaňáková pointed out that multilingual state unit of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy was cited as an example of a well functioning multilingual state. Article 19 of the State Constitution of 21 December 1867 stipulated that all national communities in the state are equal and each of them has the unlimited right to preserve and protect their nationality and language (Štefaňáková, 2012: 48).

Already shown efforts to free translation also continued in the early 20th century and although in the general theory of translation the translators inclined to idiomatic translation for a longer period, i.e. the translation, which is conducted in the spirit of the target language and not strictly following the words of the source text, in legal translation that question was finally raised by lawyers themselves. A discussion developed around this issue which Šarčević (2000: 36) called the "Swiss debate" and which was published in *Schweizerisches Juristen – Zeitung*. The problem concerned the translation of the German text of the Swiss Civil Code (*Schweizerisches Zivilgesetzbuch – ZGB*) into French (*Code Civil Suisse*) and Italian (*Codice civile Svizzero*). After years of preparatory work under the direction of Professor Hubert, the ZGB father and two other translators Professor Rossel and Judge Bertoni, three texts were promulgated in December 1907. While working on the translation, it was agreed that since all language versions of code are equally authentic, the task of the translator was to convey the essence of the original text as accurately as possible. According to supporters of tradition, this meant that the French and Italian versions must follow the German text as closely as possible. In other words, fidelity to the source text should be achieved by literal translation. However, as stated by Šarčević (2000: 37), the insistence on language equality awakened in Professor Rossel the desire to produce a translation in the spirit of the French language, not merely one that reproduced the letter of German source text. The result was his "revolutionary" translation, which definitely broke the tradition of literal translation. His translation was severely criticized in particular by G. Cesana, an attorney in Zurich, who accused him of heresy for having altered the letter of the law. In his view, Rossell´s free translation in idiomatic French was radically inaccurate because it did not reproduce the "individual words and syntax" of the German original. Cesana also argued that such a translation is a possible threat to the uniform interpretation of the three authentic texts.

Conclusion

Attempts to free translation of legal texts also continued in other historical periods, with which we will deal in a further work, being limited by space. The present paper intended to point out what a complicated development

was the translation of legal texts subjected to and also stress the important and responsible task of the translators of legal texts, whose potential inconsistent work may lead to erroneous translation resulting in serious legal consequences.

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Endnotes

[1] According to Nida, translation of the Bible dates back to the 3rd century BC (Nida and Taber, 1974).

[2] On the importance of this collection for the development of specific legal institutions of Roman law see e.g.: Turošík, M. (2010), *Právne ikony v rímskom práve*. In: *Zborník z medzinárodnej konferencie Míľniky práva*, Bratislava, s. 461–471.

[3] Bližšie pozri Mosný, P., Hubenák, L., Skaloš, M. (2010), *Dejiny štátu a práva na území Slovenska*. Banská Bystrica: Právnická fakulta UMB, s. 75–77.