CONSTRUCTED LANGUAGES
AND TRANSLATION
Comparing conlang translation with natural language translation

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ABSTRACT • The main question the paper discusses is the question as to how we can make sure that a translation into a conlang is acceptable (adequate, correct) despite the fact that there are by definition no native speakers of conlangs. The question is of relevance to practical translation work as well as translation studies even more generally since there are also natural languages for which there are no native speakers to consult on matters of translation correctness or acceptability. A major theme inside this main topic is the question as to who qualifies and on what grounds as an expert who can pass judgements on translation quality in general.

KEYWORDS • Conlang; Translation; Expert; Acceptability.

Necessity is the mother of invention.

1. Introduction

It seems to be a fairly generally accepted view nowadays that constructed languages (conlangs, for short) constitute material which can be used for a variety of interesting and useful purposes even outside communication proper. This is probably so because several scholars have supported this view by means of detailed argumentation from a range of viewpoints.

Sanders (2016), for example, explicitly notes that attitudes towards conlangs and conlang studies have changed remarkably since the days of Chomsky's well-known contention in the *Da Ali G Show* in 2003 to the effect that "you can [create a new language] if you like, and nobody will pay the slightest attention to you, because it would be just a waste of time".

Sanders (2016: e195) specifically argues that the change from the disparaging Chomskyan attitude to more tolerant stances is "beneficial to the field of linguistics, as greater acceptance of conlangs provides us with valuable tools for teaching linguistics." For a collection of papers advocating similar views of the usefulness of conlang studies based on arguments of a pedagogical nature, see Punske et al. (eds) (2020).

While Sanders supports his tenet with a number of arguments related to settings involving classroom teaching (e.g. discussion of typological issues, p. e200), there are also many other scholars who have argued for the usefulness of conlang studies on very different grounds.

Thus, to take a distinctly different example, one of the best-known conlang cases that have had a notable impact on both linguistic and literary research is the unknown language of Hildegard of Bingen (see esp. Higley 2007), which has prompted a remarkable number of research articles from a variety of viewpoints.

In this paper, however, the focus is somewhat outside linguistic and literary studies narrowly defined, the aim of the present paper being an analysis of the relevance of conlangs to translation studies. Specifically, there are three translation-related issues I propose to consider here.

First, since a conlang is by definition nobody's mother tongue, we need to consider the question as to how we can make sure that a translation from a natural language into a conlang or from a conlang into a natural language is correct. As far as translation between natural languages is concerned, there is virtually always the possibility of using native speakers of the languages involved as informants within certain limits. With conlangs, there is no such possibility available.

Secondly, as with natural languages, there is the question as to what we should do when differences of opinion surface with regard to the acceptability or correctness of a translation, some recipients sometimes favouring one translation and others preferring a somewhat different one. Since there are no native speakers of conlangs, we cannot use informants the way we can with natural languages. How, then, do we decide which of the competing translations is the best or most appropriate one?

And thirdly, even if we agree that some people could be used as informants or umpires to some extent on account of their expertise in the subject matter, how can we set limits on the variation of consistency between these experts' opinions on individual issues related to the acceptability or correctness of a given translation involving a conlang?

2. No native speakers of conlangs: who decides which translation is acceptable or correct?

It is worth our while to note here at the very outset that acceptability and correctness are two different concepts especially in the present content. Correctness is something we can attribute to linguistic constructions especially with regard to grammar and other linguistic criteria which have certain observable manifestations. Thus e.g. *This house is mine* is a correctly formulated sentence in modern English whereas *This house is my* is not.

As regards translations, the situation is somewhat different. Translations of course may and occasionally do contain grammatical and other linguistic makes too, but translations may be flawed for other types of reasons as well. Most notably, a translation may leave something to be desired because they sometimes contain either pragmatically or culturally infelicitous items. For example, as argued by Hietaranta (2000), since culture is inextricably intertwined with language, translations sometimes contain pieces of text where there is nothing wrong with the structure of the text but where the cultural view of the world conveyed is somehow strange or odd.

Thus, to take but one concrete example from Hietaranta (2000: 89), the English translation

A fax machine is available on board. Get in touch with the information desk.

is not a particularly good translation of the original Finnish text

Laivalla voit myös käyttää telefaxia. Ota Yhteys INFO-pisteeseen.

This is so for cultural reasons: while it is fully acceptable in such instructions to use the imperative form of a verb in Finnish, an English version with no *please* makes a very impolite impression.

Now, given that there are no native speakers of conlangs, how can we make sure that a conlang translation is adequate in cultural terms if there are no conlang users with a cultural back-

ground to consult on cultural issues? In short, we probably can't – unless there are other ways of ensuring the cultural appropriateness of a text in addition to native speaker informants.

This is thus an issue which makes us consider the notions of correctness and acceptability in terms wider than conlang translation if we are to look for acceptability criteria outside the use of native speaker informants, which of course may prove valuable in the case of natural language translation as well. One possibility is to consider the following distinction between adequacy and acceptability.

As noted by Munday (2012: 173), translators typically need to decide whether they wish to subject themselves, in the construction of a translation, primarily to the norms of the source text or whether they prefer (for whatever reasons) to heed the norms of the target culture. In the former case, it is a question of translational adequacy: if a source text with complex structures is translated by using similar complex structures in the target text, the translation will be adequate because the complexity of the source text is reflected in the translation to a notable and probably sufficient extent.

However, while the translation may be adequate, it may still be unacceptable in that, in its structural complexity, it may be excessively difficult for the recipients to process and ultimately understand.

Therefore, as regards translations into conlangs, it may be wise for us to focus on adequacy rather than on acceptability or correctness for two reasons in particular. First, analysing a natural language source text for the purposes of conlang translation is a process which makes us pay special attention to the way a source text is processed before any translation is even attempted – which is obviously a most useful type of exercise with regard to natural language translation too. And secondly, focusing on the source text is likely to make us detect textual properties which are different in the source and target languages and which may therefore enable us to compare the source and target languages in more general terms – which in turn prepares us as translators for similar future translation projects bet ween the two languages.

In a sense, translating a natural language text into a conlang text is a little like comparing two typologically different languages. If there is no way of knowing how, say, a given structure of language A is to be matched with a structure of language B, the best way to proceed is probably by analysing the structures of the two languages and seeing what kind of information get conveyed by a given structure in each language and by setting up a table of correspondences between the languages.

The problem of the correctness or appropriateness of translations in conlang contexts has been noted in a number of rather different contexts. To take one example where one of the best-known conlangs, Esperanto, is discussed with special regard to translation, Burghelea's (2018) paper seeks to tackle certain translation-related problems by applying an interdisciplinary approach involving linguistics, translation studies, anthropology and intercultural communication studies. This way, Burghelea argues (p. 159), it is possible to gain "a deeper understanding of the various strategies employed by Esperanto translators in order to accommodate and to inform the Esperanto cultural horizon."

Another example of the importance of getting things right in conlang translation, on the cultural level as well as with regard to structural considerations, is offered by Meluzzi (2019:), who specifically notes in her discussion of some Dothraki issues that certain "forums [where conlangs are discussed] shows instances of real use of these constructed languages concerning both cases of language acquisition and of language variation and change up to discussion within the community of users, sometimes with the direct intervention of the main creator of the language."

That such discussions of conlang translation and of conlangs in general on a forum level may well be useful in a number of ways is explicitly noted by Meluzzi (p. 6): "…translations shows

the great metalinguistic awareness of users in discussing unspecified or less specified details of the invented language, thus contributing to increasing its vocabulary and grammar."

Thus, what often matters the most may not be the structural aspects of the translation (even if these also have a part to play as regards the value of a translation as a piece of communicative text, cf. e.g. Tůmová (2021) but rather the cultural appropriateness or even credibility of the translation.

There is thus apparently no way of making sure that conlang translations of natural language texts are correct or acceptable, but there may be a way or ways of seeing to it that on the content level, especially with regard to cultural issues, conlang translations adequately convey what is communicated by their natural language source texts. This in itself, I think, is a goal worth aiming at.

3. Consistency of judgements on conlang translations

Another issue we need to consider here is the question of the consistency of people's judgements on the correctness or acceptability or adequacy of conlang translations. As with natural language translations, it is more than likely that there will be differences of opinion regarding the usability of conlang translations. Some people will be willing to accept a given conlang translation as a fully usable one while others will have a different opinion.

Again, there is some similarity here to what happens with natural language translations. Some recipients will happily accept a given translation whereas some other recipients will be likely to reject it. A case in point are the many Bible translations available today in many languages.

As regards English, there are currently more than 450 Bible translations available, some of which are deemed by some people, for a variety of reasons, as translations to be avoided (https://www.critlarge.com/articles/2019/8/18/5-bible-translations-you-should-avoid).

Another illustrative example is *Jane Eyre*, which has been translated into more than 60 languages, the number of different translations totalling now roughly 600.

Against this background, it should be no wonder that there may well be differences of opinion regarding conlang translations as well. Given that this so, how do we decide which translations are passed and which are deemed to be failures, there being no native speakers of conlangs to resort to?

One possible research avenue is consistency of opinions, which does not necessarily mean that the version backed up by most votes is the winner. The argument that a million flies cannot be wrong has been proved untenable a number of times. At one time, virtually all people on this planet were certain the Earth is (was) flat, but as far as we can tell now, they were all wrong.

There are a number of factors to consider when judgements on translations are being considered. One of them is subject matter expertise.

If you are not familiar with aviation terminology, for example, you should not pass judgements on translations dealing with matters related to aviation. If you did, you might assign a pass mark to translation referring to the rear edge of an aircraft wing as a rear edge despite the fact that the proper term is a trailing edge. Or if you have no experience in the field of technical translation in general and in power plant terminology in particular, you should not start translating a text dealing with power plant installations where a particular safety device is not properly referred to as a safety disc but as a rupture disc.

Similarly, in conlang translation, if you are not familiar with what other translators working in the field have done in the past, the very first step – before embarking on any translation project – Is to check out what translators already established in the field have done and consider whether you would do wisely to follow their path or whether you have something better to offer instead.

This way, you will not be re-inventing the wheel, which is obviously beneficial in itself, but you will also add to the terminological and other types of consistency in your field if you behave linguistically in a way which does not differ unduly from the linguistic behaviour of other agents involved in the same business.

This is useful at least for two reasons. First, exceptions are always cognitively harder to handle than the rule. That is, if the textual structures you produce are reasonably similar to those produced by other players in your field, your texts will be relatively easy to process and understand for those reading your texts. This in turn enhances mutual understanding between you and your peers.

This is both a cognitive and a social fact which is supported by empirical evidence (see e.g. Gooskens and van Heuven 2021 on the notion of mutual intelligibility and Kecskes and Zhang (2009) on the notion of common ground). A long as you behave more or less the same way as the other persons participating in communication with you, you will not be producing translations and other pieces of language which are the rule rather than the exception and therefore providing for sufficient common ground for mutual intelligibility and thereby securing efficient communication.

The other reason for the usefulness of communication patterns which do not offer too many surprises is that such communication enhances the consistency of the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic structures used, which facilitates communication especially in situations where it is to be expected that there might be some surprises ahead – as in conlang translation, where the relevant conventions have not yet had time to establish themselves because of the relatively young age of the playground.

Even so, the requirement of consistency should not be used squash opposing opinions indiscriminately. Consider the following case from the field of natural language translation. The English *sight glass* is often rendered in Finnish as *näkölasi* ('sight glass') or *mittalasi* ('measuring glass') or even *tarkkailulasi* ('monitoring glass') (see iate.europa.eu, s.v. *sight glass*). There is thus some terminological variation here, but the existence of the variation as such does not mean that we should launch a campaign against without further ado since variation in language serves some useful functions (see e.g. Chambers and Schilling 2018). We just need to make sure that variation does cause any excessive communication difficulties especially where the relevant conventions guaranteeing the efficiency of communication have not yet been established – as in conlang translation.

4. Subject matter expertise in conlang translation

Yet another aspect of conlangs especially with regard to translation is the question of subject matter expertise, which is of course of great importance to any type of translation.

There are two things related to expertise which are of special importance in the present context. One is the difference between professionals and experts. As pointed out by Siren and Hakkarainen (2002: 71), "'expert' implies that a person has acquired very high-level knowledge and skills. 'Professional', on the other hand, refers to a professional status but does necessarily imply expert-level skills." Thus, there may be professional translators who are not experts in the field of conlang translation and whose judgements on the quality of conlang translations are therefore perhaps best taken with a pinch of salt because long experience in a field by itself does not necessarily guarantee corresponding expert knowledge.

The other question worth considering here is the fact that translations are typically ill-defined problems in the sense that – unlike e.g. mathematical problems, which are unambiguous – translation "commissions or assignments are not unambiguous with only one possible interpretation

and solution" (Siren and Hakkarainen 2002: 76). Thus, a single source text may be translated in more ways than one, and there is not necessarily any one translation which is distinctly better than all the others – which is why it takes an expert to analyse the source text and assess its correspondence to a proposed translation.

Given that conlang studies as an organized field of research is relatively young and therefore not yet very well established in terms of its analytical, terminological and other principles, it follows that there may well emerge cases of conlang translation where expertise is not sufficiently well-defined to allow us to decide which particular translation, if any, is the one to be preferred.

This is also something that partly explains the fact that expert translators do not always produce the best translations, which is also noted by Siren and Hakkarainen (2002: 77). The explanation apparently is that in some cases expertise in the subject matter is more important to the final translation product than expertise in translation, which is probably due to (what I believe is) the fact that if a source text is structurally relatively uncomplicated, what matters is the availability of the requisite expertise in the subject matter so that the source text can be analysed with reference to its meaning, the structure of the source text not presenting any problems.

This, I think, is the case with a number of conlang translations, but this view must remain at the level of a conjecture as long as we do not have a clear understanding of the cognitive aspects of translation and their relation to the ways in which expertise is used in the production of translations.

To shed some light on this issue, I propose to consider some aspects of Shreve's (2018) analysis of the levels of explanation and translation expertise.

Let us start with Shreve's (2018: 97) observation that "it is possible to formulate explanations of system behavior at higher (coarser-grained) and lower (finer-grained) levels, and with a potentially indeterminate number of levels in between. The behavior of a complex system, a particular organism, or even the functioning of the mind, might then be explained at various levels of explanation depending on what entities and events are chosen as the focus of observation, what the research interest is, or the level of abstraction chosen for analysis."

From this it follows that the notion of an expert is a multidimensional one, expertise consisting of a number of ingredients of different types. Thus, if we wish to argue that a subject matter expert may under certain circumstances produce a better translation than a professional translator, we should be able to explain why this is so, which is why we need to take a closer look at the notions of expert and expertise.

The two notions have been studied within translation studies for decades (see e.g. Hansen 2013). What is of special interest in the present context is the observation made by Hardos (2018: 268), in a non-translational setting, to the effect that the "answers to this simple question [as to who is an expert] are varied and dispersed across multiple fields." Hardos's contention is made in a sociological context, but since language is by definition a social phenomenon, it follows that sociological considerations are also of relevance in language-related settings, including translation.

Hardos argues (p. 270) that when we try to define the notion of an expert, we need to consider "the social practices of obtaining and sharing knowledge." That is, no one can be an expert by themselves, in a vacuum, expertise being something which is granted on individuals in a community by its members on the basis of criteria such as the credibility of the methods by means of which knowledge is obtained and the willingness to submit this knowledge for assessment by members of the community.

Consider what this means in our conlang context. First, when we try to decide whether a translation into a conlang is acceptable, it is not at all certain that we can do this to the same extent that we can decide on the acceptability of a translation into, say, English. This is so because there is no community of native conlang speakers to bestow the status of an expert on any individual

we could consider a member of the target language community we could rely on to the extent that we agree with this individual's verdict on the acceptability of the translation.

Given that this is so, the step is probably the same as the one we take when there are no credible native speakers of a natural language into which a translation has been made we wish to have an expert opinion on. We may attempt to find a bilingual speaker who does not speak the target language as their mother tongue but who speaks the target language more or less fluently or who can at least read texts written in the target language. But again it is anything but certain that we can find such a person or at least it is not certain we can make an enlightened assumption or even a guess as to who might be such a person with sufficient conlang skills, there being no CEFR levels established on conlangs.

Further, while the communities consisting of speakers of natural languages are relatively large, consisting, in many cases, of millions of language users, conlang communities are significantly smaller, which means that the reliability of judgements passed on conlang texts may not be on the same level as those elicited from natural language speakers. This in turn may cast doubt on the reliability of the measures we apply when we decide who qualifies as an expert on a conlang.

Finally, while there are now several large corpora available on many natural languages, the situation is again very different as regards conlangs. This most unfortunate in that corpora offer one possible way of deciding who qualifies an expert on a language or at least a credible basis for arguing that someone is not an expert on a langue: if an individual's views on what is part of a language are not reflected in real-life corpus data, it is obvious that the person's opinions are not backed up by the language data in question and that the person does not qualify as an authority on the language in question. In some degree, corpora may also be used to decide which opinion on a conlang issue should be allowed to carry the day in case there is inconsistency or variation between experts: the view which has secured the widest representation in a corpus could probably be considered the winner, all other things being equal. How this equality with regard to the other things in question is determined is, however, a question which, for space reasons, cannot be entertained within the limits of the present paper even in general terms.

Corpora thus constitute evidence which is essentially of a social nature and which therefore enable us to deny some potential candidates the title of a language expert on social grounds (cf. Hardos 2018: 281). If a person's linguistic views are not compatible to a notable extent with what is exemplified in a corpus (compiled on specific, pre-set criteria), the person is probably best regarded as a non-expert on the language in question. But as sufficiently large conlang corpora are not yet available, this tool is not yet for us to use either.

For some argumentation in support of the view that corpora are useful tools for making decisions on certain types of language-related questions with special regard for translation, see e.g. Saldanha and O'Brien (2013: 50–108) and Bernardini (2022).

5. Final remarks

This paper has sought to argue that conlang studies are anything but a futile intellectual exercise especially as far as translation studies are considered.

Since there are by definition no native speakers of conlangs, we are forced to examine the acceptability and adequacy of translations into and also from conlangs by reference to other criteria than native speaker assessments. This is turn is likely to diversify our views on both conlangs and translation and is therefore a state of affairs we should investigate in some detail.

This is so also for the simple reason that even in those cases involving natural languages where there are native speakers who would qualify as language or translation experts and whose views on a given translation, for example, are considered well-founded and credible, there may

and often do exist differences of opinion between such experts. Given that such differences prevent us from accepting any of the translations available as the preferred alternative, other criteria will need to be sought. An analysis of conlang translation data and the justifications conlang translators might offer in support of their translation solutions may well point us in a direction worth exploring.

Lastly, it is worth noting that the relative scarcity of the conlang available today may also be regarded as an incentive which makes us search for new ways of resolving linguistic issues, including translation-related issues, in valid and reliable manners. As always, necessity may be the mother of invention here too.

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