

## **A COST OR AN EXPENSE? - THE PROBLEM OF AN ECONOMIST OR A TRANSLATOR?**

### **Abstract**

English - the language which has become a lingua franca among professionals of different types of businesses or enterprises contains a vast amount of lexemes which without the use of good dictionaries would remain vague or incomprehensible. Yet, the problem emerges when the above mentioned professionals need to deal with vocabulary which belongs to a field which has developed differently throughout the world, and when the translation of a particular text – document requires paramount precision and the so called professional touch. This article aims at presenting the results which were obtained during the study conducted among students of English Philology and, at the same, would be translators of English. The research dealt with translating terms which belonged to one of the fields of economics, namely accounting. The reason for this type of study was to indicate potential problems with which both novice translators and professionals may encounter while performing translations for the field of accounting. The paper also presents selected problems which occurred during the process of translation. The tool which was incorporated for the needs of the study was an extended questionnaire which included: the translation task, data section, and space for remarks – concurrent verbal protocol.

*Key words: financial translation, financial statements, the language of accounting, translation problems*

### **1. Financial translation**

In order to comment on translating financial statements Bonthron (Bonthron 2000) quotes the speech of SEC Chairman, Arthur Levitt, who stated that: "...Financial reporting is a language, just like German or English. It is the language that companies use to talk to investors. It is the language that investors use to ascertain value. It is what people use every day to decide where to invest their hard earned dollars for financial security and future opportunity...".

To support his view, the scholar mentions the fact that a "poorly-translated" financial statement may lead to a situation in which the information which is essential for the investors may turn into facts which are inaccurate and very often misleading. The author imposes the responsibility for the accuracy and precision upon translators and at the same time simply rejects those translators whose knowledge on the subject (the language of finances) is blurred or poor. The translation in the area of business might be incorporated into the field of scientific translation or the translation of English for Special Purposes. Al Hassanwi (n.d.) mentions the requirements for scientific translators which were issued by London Institute of Linguistics. The requirements may be perceived as a group of features which a good scientific translator should possess. These are:

- 1. broad knowledge of the subject-matter of the text to be translated;

- 2. a well-developed imagination that enables the translator to visualize the equipment or process being described;
- 3. intelligence, to be able to fill in the missing links in the original text;
- 4. a sense of discrimination, to be able to choose the most suitable equivalent term from the literature of the field or from dictionaries;
- 5. the ability to use one's own language with clarity, conciseness and precision;
- 6. practical experience in translating from related fields.

Taking into account the aforementioned requirements, one may conclude that being a well educated translator is insufficient in order to perform translation in the area of science. On the other hand, the 'skills' suggested by the scholar may be successfully acquired by those who decide to work in this area of translation.

Additionally, while discussing any type of translation, translation competence must be taken into consideration. For Pieńkos (2003), for example, translators are painters who do not create their own works of art, but they are masters at copying. Therefore, competence may be an umbrella term for all the skills which are essential for the translator to perform efficiently, here, to copy and be as truthful as possible. The idea of competence may be very often associated with Chomsky's studies on competence and performance. Thus, following Montalt Ressurrecció, Piorno, and García Izquierdo (2008), translation competence may be defined with the reference to pedagogical model of competence in which abilities, skills and attitudes are needed in order to perform certain activity successfully. Certain similarities may be observed between the requirements proposed by Al Hassanwi (Al Hassanwi n.d.) and those suggested by Montalt Ressurrecció, Piorno, and García Izquierdo (2008).

## **2. The research - description**

The study, the results of which are presented in this paper was conducted on a group of 50 students of the first year of graduate studies in English Philology. The syllabus of the first year of graduate studies includes classes in translation and interpreting so the subjects were asked to perform a translation activity from Polish into English. The task consisted of 15 Polish terms taken from the language of accounting which were to be translated into English. All the terms which were selected for the research are incorporated in financial statements. While translating the terms, the subjects were allowed latitude in the selection of sources in order to find a particular equivalent of a given term. Finally, the students were asked to write the justification why they decided upon a particular equivalent, and if any possible problems occurred during the process of translation - the students needed to provide a brief description of the occurred problem. Since the research did not aim at pointing possible lexical or

grammatical mistakes made by the studied group, the following study problems which might occur during the process of translation were taken into consideration:

- 1) The possibility of the occurrence of more than one equivalence – the problem with the selection of the appropriate one;
- 2) The use of sources which contain inappropriate equivalents;
- 3) The lack of the equivalent in English – problems with finding, and the attempt to create a faithful one;
- 4) The lack of appropriate translator's tools – dictionaries, encyclopedias, parallel texts;
- 5) The lack of knowledge of the field from which the terms come

### **2.1. The use of translation tools – results and description**

**Table 1. The use of translation tools**

<b>TRANSLATION TOOL</b>	<b>PERCENT OF REPOSES</b>
Free Online dictionaries	30%
Internet websites	24%
Specialized dictionaries – printed versions	18%
General Polish-English, English Polish dictionaries – printed versions	16%
Subjects' own knowledge	12%

As it may be observed, free online dictionaries were the most popular sources of information and at the same, assistance to translate the required terms. The second source of equivalents used by the researched group were internet websites. According to the compiled data, internet websites constituted 24% of all the sources which were used by the students. Specialized Polish-English, English-Polish dictionaries were on the third place among the used tools whereas dictionaries which combine general English vocabulary occupy the fourth place.

As it may be deduced, 12% of the subjects depended on their own knowledge while translating the given terms. By the use of subject's own knowledge, it is understood that the subjects did not need any translation tools in order to perform the activity. Subject's own knowledge is also perceived as possessing appropriate knowledge in the field of accounting. It needs to be mentioned, that the subjects who did not need any translation tools in order to perform the activity well, were mostly represented by those members of the researched group who apart from possessing B.A. in linguistics also graduated in economics or other related faculties.

## 2.2. Selected Translation Problems

In order to depict the difficulties which the researched group encountered during the process of translation, the third part of the distributed form may be associated with concurrent verbal protocol the aim of which is to present – share all the problems (decision making process) in a verbalized form. The students were asked to enter all observations (if such occurred) while performing the task. The concurrent verbal protocol should be essential while trying to analyze and find answer to the question why particular mistakes were made or why a particular subject decided upon a given equivalent.

Since the language of accounting requires precision and as it was mentioned by Bonthorne (2000) that “a poorly translated financial report is not acceptable” it was expected to receive 50 forms with 15 exact terms. Yet, if such expectation had been met, it would not be worth presenting a paper on the problems of translation of terms in the language of accounting.

**Table 2 Accounting Terms in Polish, Expected English Equivalents and Selected Equivalents provided by the researched group.**

<b>POLISH TERM</b>	<b>EXPECTED ENGLISH EQUIVALENT</b>	<b>SELECTED EQUIVALENTS PROVIDED BY THE RESEARCHED GROUP</b>
AKTYWA	ASSETS	ASSETS (all the equivalents given by the students were appropriate)
BIEGŁY REWIDENT	STATUTORY AUDITOR / CHARTERED ACCOUNTANT	EXPERT, CONTROLLER
KREDYTY I POŻYCZKI	LOANS AND BORROWINGS	CREDITS AND LOANS
PRZYCHODY	INCOME	INCOMES,
PRZYCHODY ZE SPRZEDAŻY	SALES INCOME	INCOMES FROM SELLING
SPRZEDAŻ	SALES	SELLING, SALE
PODATEK DOCHODOWY	INCOME TAX	INCOME TAX
KOSZTY	COSTS	EXPENSES, EXPENDITURE
WYDATKI	EXPENSES	EXPENDITURES, EXPENSES
POZOSTAŁE KOSZTY	OTHER COSTS	OTHER EXPENDITURES
REZERWA Z TYTUŁU ODROZONOWANEGO PODATKU DOCHODOWEGO	DEFERRED INCOME TAX RESERVE	POSTPONED TAX RESERVE
REZERWA NA ŚWIADCZENIA EMERYTALNE	PROVISION FOR RETIREMENT BENEFITS	OLD AGE RESERVE
SPÓŁKA Z ORGANICZONĄ ODPOWIEDZIALNOŚCIĄ	LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY	LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY
SPÓŁKA AKCYJNA	JOINT-STOCK COMPANY	SHARE COMPANY, STOCK COMPANY
ŚRODKI TRWAŁE	FIXED ASSETS	FIXED MEANS, ASSETS

As it was assumed before the research, a large number of students found it difficult to provide a proper equivalent of the required term. The cause of such a situation was due to the fact that the sources which were used during the process gave more than one possible equivalent. Thus, hesitation and probably lack of knowledge of the differences between the given versions led to mistranslation and, in general, failure. The examples of the extracts from the protocols present as follows:

The term *KOSZTY* – COSTS

The provided equivalents: EXPENDITURE, EXPENSES

Justification / Remarks: [I found costs and expenses in my dictionary; since I think that the term ‘costs’ sounds very Polish and I did not want to make mistake, I decided for ‘expenses’],

The term *BIEGŁY REWIDENT* – STATUTORY AUDITOR / CHARTERED ACCOUNTANT

The provided equivalents: EXPERT, AUDITOR, CHIEF ACCOUNTANT, CONTROLLER

Justification / Remarks: [the internet website says ‘expert’, I suppose it means ‘*biegły rewident*’], [statutory auditor is a chief accountant], [statutory auditor controls the finances so it should be ‘controller’], [I have seen this term for the first time]

The term *SPRZEDAŻ* – SALES

The provided equivalents: SELLING, FOR SALE,

Justification / Remarks: [This term is very confusing and there are a lot of definitions in my dictionary; for me sales is connected with the season of selling products at lower prices]

The term *REZERWA NA ŚWIADCZENIA EMERYTALNE* - PROVISION FOR RETIREMENT BENEFITS, PENSION PROVISION

The provided equivalents: PENSION BENEFITS, RESERVE FOR OLD AGE SERVICE

Justification / Remarks: [I didn’t find the term; I tried to create the equivalent by translating it literally], [I have no idea what it is, but I found ‘pension benefits’ so I think it’s correct],

The term *WYDATKI* – EXPENSES

The provided equivalents: SPENDING, COSTS

Justification / Remarks: [for me when we spend money is the act of spending], ['costs' is correct because 'costs' is the same as 'expenses']

While analyzing the examples provided above, the focus was paid to the remarks on the performance given by the students. As it may be observed, and as it has been mentioned before, the main difficulty which occurs while translating the terms of accounting arises when a dictionary provides more than one term. This phenomenon causes ambiguity for the translator, as the lack of differences between lexemes may cause providing equivalents which are not proper or slightly differ in terms of the language of accounting. The use of different, unauthorized and sometimes unreliable internet tools may lead to the development of a false thesaurus which will incorporate unrevised vocabulary on a given topic.

Another problem which can be traced is the fact that without proper economic knowledge (either proper educational background or creating translator's domains) it is almost impossible to understand the message of the text. None of the researched subjects used in their translation parallel texts the use of which is extremely helpful since they provide they may function as a matrix for the translator. Very often, time constraints also play an important role when it comes to translate texts and documents. The translator's time is limited by the company which orders a professional translation (in the research conducted in 2008, over 10 out of 20 persons who were involved in translation of economic texts admitted that the time which is imposed by a company to translate some documents is very limited and it happens that the quantity of the translated documents is more important than the quality<sup>1</sup>).

## **Conclusions**

The research shows that the translation of texts or documents which are strictly associated with the field of accounting may prove difficult and ambiguous. It may be observed that providing a wrong equivalent of a given term may change not only the message of a document which is translated, but also the image and position of a company. If the term *cost*, for instance, is confused with the term *expense*, a potential investor may have a wrong picture of the company in which he/she is interested.

Consequently a good understanding and comprehension of the extralinguistic context of the text that is to be translated might help translators to understand and transform the text they deal with. Moreover, the selection of translator's tools is very significant; the use of specialized dictionaries and parallel text should become a habit for a person who intends to be

---

<sup>1</sup> The data was gathered during the author's research on accounting vocabulary. The researched group consisted of 20 subjects who, at that time, worked for companies as: translators, assistants, accountants or financial advisers.

involved in any area of translation. There is no place for hesitation or probability in the language of accounting. In short, it is impossible to treat any part of a financial statement as a literary text. The only solution to the problematic issue of the equivalence of the terms in accounting is to observe and monitor the field of accounting and to constantly improve one's knowledge. Thanks to this the translator(s) may gain insight into a very spectacular phenomenon, namely they will witness the diversity of the language of economics, which is a part of the global language. Moreover, such observations will make the translator(s) not only more sensitive or responsible but also reliable.

### ***Bibliography***

1. Al-Hassnawi, Ali R. A. *Aspects of Scientific Translation: English into Arabic Translation as a Case Study*. <http://www.translationdirectory.com/article10.htm> [2010.12.10]
2. Bonthrone, R. (2000) German Financial Accounting and Reporting FAQs and Fallacies. *Translation Journal*. Vol. 4, No. 3 [online] <http://translationjournal.net/journal/13finan.htm>[2010.08.20]
3. Mackay, R. Mountford, A. (1978) *English for Specific Purposes*. Longman.
4. Pieńkos, J. (2003) *Podstawy przekładoznawstwa*. Warszawa: Zakamycze
5. Montalt Ressurrecció, V., Ezpeleta Piorno, P., García Izquierdo, I. (2008) The Acquisition of Translation Competence through Textual Genre. *Translation Journal* Vol. 12, No. 4 [online] <http://translationjournal.net/journal/46competence.htm> [2010.11.19]
- 6.