Buletinul Ştiinţific al Universităţii Politehnica Timişoara
Seria Limbi moderne

Scientific Bulletin of the Politehnica University of Timişoara
Transactions on Modern Languages

Vol. 25, Issue 1 / 2026

How Wide Asunder? Diachronic Translation and Linguistic Distance

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Abstract: This paper aims to define diachronic translation within a network of related concepts, such as intra-lingual translation, inter-lingual translation, rewording, historical stylization, substitutive adaptation, transformative transubstantiation, and modernisation. It also demonstrates the concept of diachronic translation using key examples from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* translated into Contemporary English. The author proposes two perspectives on diachronic translation: one as intra-lingual translation (transformative transubstantiation) and the other as inter-lingual translation (substitutive adaptation). To highlight the concept of linguistic distance, the paper compares passages from Middle English (specifically Chaucer's work) with their Contemporary English versions and applies the idea of diachronic translation to this process of modernization. The paper argues that diachronic translation is an appropriate concept in this context, advocating for its use. Although this paper is somewhat preliminary and requires further evidence and examples, it raises awareness of the relatively underexplored phenomenon of diachronic translation. Whether viewed as intra-lingual (transformative transubstantiation) or inter-lingual (substitutive adaptation), diachronic translation can stand on its own if granted the proper epistemic recognition. It serves as a valuable resource for readers interested in the past, providing its insights in a modernized form. This paper calls for the formal acknowledgement of diachronic translation.

Keywords*:* linguistic distance; diachronic translation; intralingual translation; transubstantiation; interlingual translation; substitutive adaptation; Geoffrey Chaucer;Middle English

1. Introduction

The paper sets out to define diachronic translation within a constellation of kindred concepts, such as intra-lingual translation, inter-lingual translation, rewording, historical stylisation, substitutive adaptation, transformative trans-substantiation and modernisation. The paper also illustrates the diachronic translation concept through essential examples from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* rendered in Contemporary English. The author suggests a twin outlook on diachronic translation either as intra-lingual translation (transformative TRANS-SUBSTANTIATION or as

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inter-lingual translation (SUBSTITUTIVE ADAPTATION). In order to bring forth the concept of linguistic distance, we gauge the distance between Middle English stretches of text (namely Geoffrey Chaucer's texts) and their Contemporary English counterparts and apply the concept of diachronic translation to this modernisation procedure. We show that diachronic translation seems to be a suitable concept here and therefore accredit its use. Even if this paper is relatively sketchy and needs further evidence fleshed out by an array of illustrations, it still raises the readers' awareness of a relatively less studied phenomenon and namely that of diachronic translation.

According to most scholars, the degree of similarity that two languages share in terms of linguistic features is called linguistic distance. It shows how different one language or dialect is from another (see Ginsburg and Weber 2016). Although they lack a uniform approach to gauging linguistic distance between languages, most scholars handle the concept in a variety of linguistic situations, such as learning additional languages, historical linguistics, language-based conflicts and the effects of language differences on trade (Chiswick and Miller 2005). Linguistic distance is a notion which looks riddled with difficulty. However, it still seems possible for us to find languages along a continuum based on formal characteristics, such as the number of cognates in languages or sets of shared syntactic characteristics, or to establish different stages of the same language along a continuum based on the same criteria. This is our case: Middle English and Contemporary English.

2. Measuring linguistic distance

The idea of measuring distance between languages seems to go back to the work of the French explorer Dumont D'Urville. He gathered comparative words lists of various languages during his voyages aboard the ship Astrolabe from 1826 to 1829 and, in his work about the geographical division of the Pacific, he came up with a method to measure the linguistic distance among languages (ten Thije and Zeevaart 2007). The method used by modern glottochronology, developed by Morris Swadesh in the 1950s, gauges distances from the percentage of shared cognates, which are words with a common historical origin. Some other scholars proposed a new automated method which uses normalised Levenshtein distance among words with the same meaning and averages on the words contained in a list (Chiswick and Miller 2005). The proposed measures used for linguistic distance reflect various kinds of construing the term itself. One approach is based on mutual intelligibility, *i.e.* the ability of speakers of one language to understand the other language. This means that the higher the linguistic distance, the lower is the level of mutual intelligibility.

Mutual intelligibility determines how easy or difficult it will be for the speakers to grasp the fundamentals of the new language. This may be facilitated by the sharing of some common words or the similarity in the arrangement of grammatical and lexical forms. For instance, different territories or countries may speak the same basic language with only some minor or major differences in intonation, meaning of words (Crowley and Bowern 2010). Because cognate words play an important role in mutual intelligibility between languages, these figure

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prominently in such analyses. The higher the percentage of cognate (as opposed to non-cognate) words in the two languages with respect to one another, the lower is their linguistic distance. Also, the greater the degree of grammatical relatedness and lexical relatedness, the lower is the linguistic distance (Crowley and Bowern 2010).

Besides cognates, other aspects that are often measured are similarities of syntax and written forms. Cognates can be lexically (phonologically) similar but grammatically (semantically) dissimilar. Cognates in related languages can even be identical in form, but semantically distinct. Similar cases can be found in the Middle English versus Contemporary English comparison.

Speaking of Chaucer's choice of words, we can say that many of them have to be transformed or replaced in a modern translation. The reasons for their transformation or replacement, however, are different. Some words will be incomprehensible for the modern reader because they have been ousted from the English vocabulary completely or are lingering on the outskirts, being limited functionally. Other words will be familiar but nevertheless misunderstood because the common meanings associated with them in the present day English will not seem to tie in with the context. Some words will look quaint, amusing or out-of-place because Chaucer employs them differently from contemporary usage.

3.Diachronic translation. Intra-lingual (with transubstantiation) or inter-lingual (with substitution)

Translation is not only re-production by substitution of a work of literature in a new ethno-cultural and language context, but also the re-making by transformation of the respective text for the benefit of a new audience belonging to a new time period (Kundzich 1968). A translator often deals with an original created in another historical age, also in the translator's mother tongue which has changed over time so much that its former state looks like another language (Vinogradov 2001). The concept of diachronic translation makes us distinguish between intra-lingual translation and inter-lingual translation, and it also makes us spell out specific dimensions of each of these two subtypes and criteria for the translation activity (see also Kundzich 1968; Görlach 1986; Iamartino 1998; Vinogradov 2001). Diachronic translation is a subtype of intra-lingual translation or, from another point of view, a subtype of inter-lingual translation and takes in the constellation of concepts of "rewording", "adaptation", "historical stylisation" and modernisation (Iamartino 1998).

We set out to accredit the concept of diachronic translation by gauging the intra-lingual distance between a Middle English text and its Contemporary English counterpart as we compare stretches from Chaucer's Canterbury Tales to a contemporary translation. We also set out to pinpoint the principal aspects at play that call for the text modernisation and to lay down the guidelines along which a translator sets about modernising the text (Iamartino 1998).

If we look at the history of English as a continuous flow, we can look upon this flow as an act of trans-substantiation. Then diachronic translation is here an intra-

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lingual translation. The target text organically flows from the source text even if the two ends of this continuum naturally remain wide asunder. It is a bit like the analogical principle in clocks. Each language phase seamlessly grows out of the previous one without a break.

In case we look at the history of English as a substitution of discourses, Middle English and Contemporary English are two worlds of discourse wide asunder, as the Contemporary English discourse replaces the Middle English one. The diachronic translation is here a substitutive adaptation leaning more towards inter-lingual translation as the Contemporary English text replaces the Middle English text, and the two texts stay wide asunder. It is a bit like the digital principle in clocks. Each phase is distinct and one phase follows another.

Since the earliest centuries, the Catholic Church has spoken of the elements used in celebrating the Eucharist as being changed into the body and blood of Christ. The concepts used to describe this change were "trans-substantiation" and "transformation". The bread and wine were said to be "made over into", "changed into", the body and blood of Christ. To boot, Augustine said: "Not all bread, but only that which receives the blessing of Christ becomes the body of Christ" (qtd. in Hillebrand 2005). When later theologians agreed to take over Aristotelian metaphysics in Western Europe, they explained the trans-substantiation that was already part of Catholic teaching in terms of Aristotelian substance and accidents (Hillebrand 2005). The term is employed in the Catholic Church to claim the fact of Christ's presence and the mysterious and sweeping change which takes place, but not to explain how the transformation takes place, since this occurs "in a way surpassing understanding". And now we shall see how we mold this metaphysical concept into a translational one (Hillebrand 2005).

4.Exemplified diachronic translation as transformative transubstantiation or substitutive adaptation

A text created in the Middle English period requires transformative trans-substantiation (my metaphor) OR substitutive adaptation for the modern reader due to wholesale changes which have transformed the phonology, vocabulary and grammar of English over the centuries and made an adequate comprehension of a Middle English text difficult without a translator's mediation.

Diachronic translation occurs when the transformative trans-substantiation of the original text into the source text takes the form of an intra-lingual translation as this involves changes on all levels: lexical, morphological, syntactical, etc. Obviously, the complexity of textual trans-substantiation depends on how wide asunder are the two ends of the continuum.

We also feel justified to call this substitutive adaptation 'diachronic translation', as it performs the same function as inter-lingual translation, *i.e.* decodes the meaning of the original text/discourse in its historical and socio-cultural context and replaces it with another discourse piece for the benefit the modern reader. Obviously, the magnitude of the substitutive adaptation hinges upon how wide

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asunder the two texts/discourse pieces lie. The original Middle English quotes stem from the eChaucer edition and all the examples translated below hail from the Riverside Chaucer edition (1990) and are also quoted by Sidorenko (2011: 1465-1469). We find them highly relevant, too:

> ... And therto hadde he riden, no man ferre,
> As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse ...
> -and had campaigned, no man farther,
> in both Christian and heathen lands
> (General Prologue 48-49)
>
> Of fustian he wered a gypon
> Al bismotered with his habergeon ...
> – He wore a jerkin ofcoarse cloth
> all stained with rust by his coat of mail.
> (General Prologue 75-76)
>
> To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes…
> – ... to renowned shrines in various distant lands ...
> (General Prologue 13-14)
>
> ... But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye ...
> -... but well I know, surely ...
> (The Wife of Bath's Prologue 27)
>
> …Herkne eek, lo, which a sharp word for the nones,
> Biside a welle, Jhesus, God and man, spak.
> ... – Lo! Hear what a sharp word Jesus, man and
> God, spoke on a certain occasion beside a well.
> (The Wife of Bath's Prologue 14-16)
>
> God woot, this noble kyng, as to my wit,
> The firste nyght had many a myrie fit...
> – God knows this noble king, to my thinking, had a merry life…
> (The Wife of Bath's Prologue 41-42)
>
> Wher can ye seye, in any manere age,
> That hye God defended mariage
> By expres word? –
> When can you see that in any time
> Great God forbade marriage explicitly?
> (The Wife of Bath's Prologue 59-61)
>
> I woot as wel as ye, it is no drede …
> – You know as well as I, without a doubt ...
> (The Wife of Bath's Prologue 63)

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... A lusty playn, habundant of vitaille ...
-... a lively plain, abundant in its harvest ...
(The Clerk's Tale 59)

"Ye, false harlot," quod the millere ...
-"You – false knave!" said the miller.
(The Reeve's Tale 4268)

... So priketh hem nature in hir corages ...
- so nature pricks them in their hearts ...
(General Prologue 11)

... God bad us for to wexe and multiplye ...
-... God expressly instructed us to increase and multiply.
(The Wife of Bath's Prologue 28)

Curteis he was, lowely, and servysable ...
-He was courteous, modest and helpful…
(General Prologue 99)

... And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes ...
– ... and palmers to seek foreign shores ...
(General Prologue 13)

... And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende ...
– And especially from every shire's end
in England they make their way ...
(General Prologue 15-16)

... and the yonge sonne Hath in the Ram
his half cours yronne ...
– ... and the young sun
has run half his course through Aries the Ram ...
(General Prologue 7-8)

5. Comments on risks and difficulties

The main risk one incurs when translating Middle English into Modern English is shown not by the unfamiliar words but the misleading lexemes which look the same and mean something different. In order to illustrate this, we may think of M.E. *nice* that actually means 'foolish', of *defend* that means 'to forbid' (see French *défendre*) or of *do* that can mean 'cause to' or 'put'. Thus we infer that it is often misleading to render a Middle English word by the word which has hailed from it in Modern English; and even where the basic sense has stayed the same, the connotations or pragmatic use may differ (for instance, a word which was in ordinary colloquial usage

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in Middle English may sound obsolete to contemporary speakers of English, *e.g.*, *thou*). Our advice reads: always translate sense-for-sense, not word-for-word (Görlach 1986).

Speaking of syntax, the usual word-order in the Middle English both in regular prose or in poetry stood halfway between the free word order of Old English and the frozen word order of Contemporary English. Middle English still had more 'live' inflections that guided the construal of the message than Contemporary English has. That is why the translator is encouraged to feel free to modernise the text provided he/she has understood the syntax of the original thoroughly (Sidorenko 2011).

It is true that Middle English uses inflections to indicate grammatical relationships to a greater degree than Modern English, so it is important that one should be aware of the various inflectional forms. In particular, one should acknowledge the essential use of the different forms of the personal pronouns, the sundry plural forms and the verbal inflections, all of which can vary from dialect to dialect in Middle English. He/she will need sound knowledge of morphology, for instance, to single out impersonal verbs or other types of verbs (Görlach 1986).

6. Conclusion

Diachronic translation either viewed as intra-lingual translation (transformative TRANS-SUBSTANTIATION or as inter-lingual translation (SUBSTITUTIVE adaptation) can live a life of its own provided we grant it the deserved epistemic status. It renders a service to all readership steeped in the matters of the past and willing to take in its knowledge albeit in a modernised guise. The present paper is a plea for its accreditation.

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