

The Emergence of Grammar and Meaning in Intertextual and Interlinguistic Practice

Dorđe BOŽOVIĆ & Borko KOVAČEVIĆ*

Abstract: The paper examines expression of (non-)specificity in a Serbo-Croatian translation from Albanian, by analyzing motivation behind translator's choices to diverge from the source expression of nominal morphosemantic categories such as number and degree. We argue that grammatical and semantic features of the target language, that are otherwise morphologically less transparent, in that way emerge through intertextual and interlinguistic practice, such as translation. As a language contact scenario, this allows for a possible explanation of the emergence of shared morphosyntactic features in the languages of the Balkans, the so-called "Balkanisms".

Keywords: Balkan languages, nominal morphosyntax and semantics, (non-)specificity, translation.

1. Introduction

Although research into translation of literary texts traditionally falls within the domain of literary criticism, textual aesthetics and stylistics, it can nonetheless provide valuable insights for both theoretical and applied linguistics, too, as well as the translation studies in general. Unlike other types of discourse, literary texts are usually rich in both vocabulary and form, they encompass a variety of different genres, and not least importantly, they are (at least since the invention of printing press and the rise of modern literature) generally produced for vast audiences of readers, in a language that,

* Department of General Linguistics, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philology, Serbia. E-mail: djordje.bozovic@fil.bg.ac.rs

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however poetic, is still meant to be communicative and to “sound natural” to its users. A narrative text of significant length is thus largely representative of the language it is written in, at least more so than administrative, legal, academic documents, or other types of texts that utilise language for specific purposes, are structurally formulaic and conservative, narrowly focused as well as abundant in highly specialized terminology. And even though modern linguistics, in the spirit of scientific specialization, has largely abandoned literary prose as its main source of information on natural language, in favour of the spoken language and intuitive grammaticality judgements of native speakers, as the former was deemed too “artistic” and artificial, it is exactly for this reason that in recent years, the study of language, with the rise of discourse analysis and corpus linguistics, has seen a renewed interest in narrative prose. After all, “telling stories” is precisely what language is used for by its speakers in everyday communication, be it spoken, written or signed.

Translations of literary texts are of no less significance. They have a long history of practice and have developed articulated techniques, as well as various styles and schools of thought. Alongside professional translation, this is one of the most pronounced branches of translation. Much effort is usually put into translation of literature, and it is a task often given to the most skilled of professionals in the field. The result, if successful, is a piece of prose no less nuanced than the original. Yet, having two such texts, the source text (ST) and the target text (TT), allows for a more profound contrastive analysis of the actual linguistic mechanisms used to produce meaning, and could shed light on how language works in organic settings beyond the evidence we otherwise gather from the “authentic” (monolingual) data produced by the native speakers. In linguistics, therefore, comparative analysis of translated parallel texts, or parallel corpora, may function as a kind of experimental technique, where all other factors are controlled for, save for the language itself.

This paper presents one such case study of a Serbo-Croatian translation of narrative prose from Albanian (Suroi 2016), arguing that it is precisely the practice of translation through which grammatical categories and semantic features of the target language emerge. The analysed text is a collection of essays by an acclaimed Kosovar Albanian author, and its translation into Serbo-Croatian (SCr) was praised for its “naturalness” and skill. One of the reasons that the translation was deemed successful, we believe, lies in the fact that the translator often chose deliberately to diverge from the ST, in order to produce the same intended meaning in the target language by different means.

Namely, during the process of translation, a translator has to consciously reflect upon the structure and meaning of both the ST and the TT. She thus develops a kind of metalinguistic awareness of lexical, grammatical, semantic and pragmatic features of both languages/texts. For example, a translator’s lexical awareness is often explicitly manifested in consulting dictionaries, reflecting on the meanings and use of different lexemes, searching for synonyms, etc. This is a kind of metalinguistic awareness. In the same way, a translator has to consciously reflect upon the structural

and semantic/pragmatic features of both languages/texts, even if she perhaps does it more implicitly. This is what essentially differentiates human translators from their machine counterparts. However successful may or may not be, machine translators do not reflect upon the structure and meaning of the texts they translate, unlike human translators, for whom the reflection on the structure and meaning of both languages/texts is a necessary precondition for translation to happen. Also, this kind of metalinguistic awareness is the driving force behind the choices a human translator ultimately has to make in order to produce a successful translation. Sometimes, a translator may choose to unexpectedly diverge from the ST, i.e. not to translate literally, and it is precisely because of her metalinguistic reflection on both languages/texts that she consciously chooses to do so. This is the case with our Albanian to SCr translation, as well.

A successful human translator often has no other option but to diverge from the lexical or grammatical features of the ST. This is because of lexical and grammatical differences between the source and the target languages. Divergences of this kind include lexical (phraseological, stylistic etc.) adaptation (“rephrasing”), as well as trivial grammatical (morphosyntactic) adaptation. Such divergences are marked in **bold** (for lexical “rephrasing”) and *italic* (for grammatical adaptation) in the glosses in example (1).

- (1) a. Në veturën “Yugo”, të quajtur edhe “Zastava”,
In **vehicle-ACC** “Yugo” *ART.ACC* called also “Zastava”
- ishin tre civilë të moshuar...
be-*3PL.IMPERF* three civilian-PL ART.PL **aged**
- b. U automobilu marke “jugo”, zvanom još i
In **automobile-LOC** **type-GEN** “Yugo” called-*LOC* also
- “zastava”, bilo je troje civila
“Zastava” be-*3SG.PERF* three civilian-*GEN.PL*
- starije dobi...
old-COMP.GEN **age-GEN**

The Albanian sentence in (1a) is taken from the ST of Suroi (2016), and it literally reads: “In a vehicle ‘Yugo’, also called ‘Zastava’, were three old/aged civilians”. Its SCr counterpart in (1b) literally reads: “In an automobile of the type ‘Yugo’, also called ‘Zastava’, were three older civilians/three civilians of older age”. The translator obviously had to make trivial grammatical adjustments in that, for example, the SCr locative case is substituted for the Albanian accusative simply because the two languages have non-identical case systems, or in that the verb has got plural agreement with the phrase “three civilians” in Albanian, whereas such numeral phrases trigger singular agreement on the verb in SCr. Also, the translator has substituted the word “vehicle” with “automobile” in the TT, because its literal counterpart (SCr *vozilo* ‘vehicle’) is more often used in administrative texts, such as

police or traffic reports, and thus would be inappropriate for the style of the ST. Similar lexical/phraseological adaptations are the use of prepositional phrases “of the type” and “of age”, which are in SCr more naturally used as attributes in these contexts than attributive nouns or adjectives as in Albanian.

However, there is also one unexpected, non-trivial grammatical divergence in the example in (1), and it is marked in underline in the glosses. It is the use of the adjective “old” in its comparative form in the TT, as opposed to the basic form (positive degree) of the adjective in the ST. This kind of divergence from the ST seems unmotivated from both lexical and grammatical points of view. Here, the translator has made non-trivial choice to deliberately diverge from the grammatical features of the ST, by substituting one member of a grammatical category (degree of comparison) for another, not because of the differences in grammar of the two languages, but as a result of conscious metalinguistic reflection upon the structure and meaning of both languages/texts. It is this kind of “rephrasing grammar”, i.e. non-trivial grammatical adaptation, that we will look more into.

2. “Rephrasing Grammar”: A Case Study

We will look in more detail into non-trivial grammatical divergences from the ST in the nominal domain in our translation. In both SCr and Albanian, nouns are assigned gender (masculine, feminine or neuter) and are inflected for number (singular or plural) and case, and in Albanian, but not in SCr, also for definiteness. Adjectives in both SCr and Albanian agree with the noun they modify in gender, number and case (albeit the latter only holds for the so-called articulated adjectives in Albanian), and can also express degree, as well as in SCr, but not in Albanian, definiteness. Pronouns, in addition to gender, number and case, in both languages are also assigned person (first, second or third).

As pointed out by Booij (1994;1996), there is a distinction between inherent and contextual inflection. Contextual inflection is dictated by syntactic context, and examples of such inflection in nominals are (structural) case or agreement markers for adjectives. Inherent inflection, on the other hand, is not required by syntax, and the examples of such inflection in nominals are the categories number, degree in adjectives and person in pronouns. Gender is lexical in both Albanian and SCr, while the category of definiteness is rather mutually incommensurable in the two languages. Divergences in translation from the source expression of contextual inflection are of the trivial kind, such as case and agreement in the example (1). On the other hand, it is divergences from the source expression of inherent inflection, such as number, person or degree, that are non-trivial and of interest to us.

Inherent inflection in the nominal domain, therefore, conveys semantic (i.e. referential) rather than syntactic information. In our case, by deliberately diverging from the source expression of inherent inflection in nominals, the translator was trying to communicate some of their semantics, that is morphologically non-trivial and less transparent. So, the motivation behind the translator’s conscious choices to diverge

from the grammatical features of the ST, by substituting one member of a non-trivial grammatical category for another, was to obtain the desired meaning. In our examples with nominals, so is the case with (non-)specificity and genericity.

A nominal phrase can have specific reading if it has a particular or a unique referent. Otherwise, it has non-specific or generic reading. Every human language distinguishes between specific and non-specific readings; however, most languages lack any overt morphological markers of (non-)specificity. That is why specificity and genericity are often “parasitic” on other morphosemantic and morphosyntactic categories in the nominal domain, such as definiteness. In Albanian, a noun phrase (NP) in the definite form is usually specific, but indefinite NPs are ambiguous with regard to specificity. In some languages, however, specificity is overtly marked in some contexts. So is the case in Turkish, as described by Enç (1991), where case marking encodes specificity in certain positions, so that accusative NPs with overt case morphology have specific readings, while those without case morphology are non-specific. SCr has a similar pattern in direct object NPs, which in some contexts take the accusative case markers if specific or definite, and the genitive (partitive) case markers if non-specific, generic or indefinite.

In most other contexts, however, in both Albanian and SCr, specificity and genericity of a NP is unmarked. Still, by comparing the ST and the TT in which the translator was trying to communicate (non-)specific and generic readings of NPs by non-trivially varying their grammatical features, it is possible to identify which nominal grammatical categories is specificity in SCr “parasitic” on. As it turns out, those are categories of inherent inflection rather than of contextual inflection, such as grammatical number and a pragmatic category related to it, T–V distinction in pronouns, degree in adjectives, as well as in some contexts, voice in verbs.

Following is a very brief survey of relevant examples, after which we will discuss their significance for Balkan linguistics from an emergentist point of view.

2.1. Number

Grammatical number is a morphosyntactic category inherent in nouns and pronouns and contextual in number agreement markers for adjectives and verbs, in both Albanian and SCr. (Non-)specificity and genericity in SCr can be “parasitic” on number, as exemplified by a non-trivial variation of its two members, singular and plural, in the translation of Suroi (2016), as in (2) and (3).

- (2) a. ... do të thoshte dikush nga arsimiti ...
CONDIT say-3*SG* **someone** from education
- b. ... bi rekli ljudi iz prosvete ...
CONDIT say-3*PL* **people** from education
- “Someone/people working in education would say...”

In (2), non-specific or generic reading of the Albanian phrase “someone working in education” is desired (i.e. anyone or everyone, not a specific someone). Apparently, there is a danger of singular “someone” having specific reading in SCr, so the translator opted for the generic lexical plural “people”.

- (3) a. Vetëm budallenjtë dhe të këqijtë ...
 only fool-PL.DEF and ART.PL evil-PL.DEF
- b. Samo budala i zlobnik ...
 only fool-SG and evil-**person-SG**

“Only fools and evil ones/Only a/the fool and an/the evil person...”

In (3), non-specific reading of the Albanian phrase “fools and evil ones” is desired. SCr plural *budale i zlobnici* could equally have non-specific reading, but specificity here seems to be “parasitic” on both number and definiteness. As the phrase is both semantically non-specific and definite (the latter is overtly marked in Albanian as well, by the suffix *-të*), the translator opted for the singular rather than the plural. As SCr NPs are not overtly marked for definiteness, the only inflectional category capable of expressing this semantic feature inherently is number (as case is contextual and gender is lexical), and a singular NP seems to entail definiteness (and non-genericity) more readily than a plural NP, which can easily take indefinite and generic readings. It is worth noting that the translator has avoided an indefinite pronoun in (2) as well, only to express indefiniteness/genericity by a plural noun.

In (2), the translator has non-trivially substituted TT plural for ST singular, and in (3) the other way around. Both the singular and the plural number can have non-specific readings in SCr, but it is the interplay of specificity, definiteness and genericity that motivated the translator to diverge from the ST expression of these (morpho)semantic categories and to express them by means of a different member of the morphosyntactic category of number in SCr.

2.2. T–V Distinction

Both Albanian and SCr express politeness by means of a T–V distinction in the second person pronoun. Given that this is morphologically in fact a distinction in grammatical number (second person singular vs. second person plural), it could only be expected that (non-)specificity and genericity be no less “parasitic” on this category than as it was the case with nouns. Compare (4) and (5).

- (4) a. Nëse je krejtësisht i bindur ...
 If be-2SG.PRES **totally** ART.MASC.SG convinced
- b. Ako ste u potpunosti ubedeni ...
 If be-2PL.PRES **in totality** convinced-MASC.PL

“If you (SG/PL) are totally convinced...”

- (5) a. ... ti dhe pasuesit e tu
you.SG and follower-PL ART.PL your.2SG
 duhet të besoni ...
have-to CONJ believe-2PL.PRES
- b. ... çete vi i vaši sledbenici
2PL.FUT you.PL and your.2PL follower-PL
 sigurno verovati ...
certainly believe
 “You and your (SG/PL) followers have to/will certainly believe...”

The translator decided to substitute second person plural pronouns in the TT for second person singular pronouns from the ST. The intended reading was non-specific (i.e. generic “you” rather than a specific addressee), and even though singular “you” can be used with a generic meaning in SCr as well as in Albanian, it seems that the translator again put faith in the plural number for expressing generic non-specificity in SCr better than the singular.

2.3. Degree

An instance of a non-trivial substitution in the morphosemantic category of degree in adjectives is already seen in (1). Another one is in (6).

- (6) a. ... shumë nga të cilët ishin
 many of ART.PL which-PL be-3PL.IMPERF
 të moshuar dhe të drobitur ...
 ART.PL **aged** **and** ART.PL exhausted
- b. ... mnogiod kojih su bili
 many of which-GEN.PL be-3PL.PERF
 starije dobi ili iscrpljeni
old-COMP.GEN age-GEN or exhausted-PL
 “Many of whom were old(er)/of older age and/or exhausted...”

NPs modified by adjectives in their basic form (as in “old people”) seem to get specific readings in SCr. On the other hand, adjectives in the comparative form (as in “older people”) allow for a non-specific reading of the entire NP. This is in fact probably a kind of semantic iconicity, with adjective comparison perceived as “widening” the scope of reference.

2.4. Voice

Finally, it seems (non-)specificity can “parasitize” on argument structure, as manifested by non-trivial variations in the expression of voice in (7) and (8).

- (7) a. ... se njëri mund të ngjizë ...
 that one can *CONJ* **shape-3SG.PRES**
- b. ... da se može zamisliti ...
 that REFL can **imagine**

The verb in (7a) is in active voice, but with a generic reading expressed by “one” in Albanian, not unlike the use of “someone” in (2). Again, it seems that the corresponding SCr indefinites (as *neko*, etc.) would produce an undesired specific reading, so the translator chose to rephrase the clause in (7b) into reflexive passive voice, which in SCr readily conveys genericity.

- (8) a. Dhe si të vdekur, shpejt të harruar.
 and **as** ART.PL dead soon ART.PL forgotten
- b. A kada umreš, brzo te
 and **when** die-2SG.PRES soon you-ACC
- svi zaborave.
all forget-3PL.PRES
- “And when you/(people) die/are dead, you/(people) are soon forgotten/soon everyone forgets you.”

In (8), the translator did exactly the opposite – substituting active voice for Albanian passive participles. Generic reading of (8b) is supported by second person singular generic “you” as well as the plural number and the use of the present tense in verbs. It is also lexically expressed by the pronoun *svi* ‘all’. As semantic features of NPs, it is only natural for (non-)specificity and genericity in certain contexts to be also entailed by other related constituents at the sentence level.

3. Conclusion

So far, we’ve seen that semantic categories that are morphologically opaque or less transparent in a language, such as specificity in SCr and Albanian NPs, may “parasitize” on other morphosemantic and morphosyntactic categories of inherent inflection, both in nominals as well as in other related constituents beyond NPs. By comparing non-trivial variations in their expression in parallel texts, we were able to identify several means of such “parasitic” expression of (non-)specificity in SCr that are otherwise less transparent within the language. It was in fact the translator that, by non-trivially diverging from the grammatical features of the ST, practically made evident the semantic category of specificity/genericity in the TT, motivated by a necessary conscious metalinguistic reflection on the structure and meaning of both languages/texts.

Grammatical and semantic features of the target language thus emerge in translation from the ST, i.e. intertextually and interlinguistically. For this translator at least, specificity is an emergent category in SCr, as evidenced by the non-trivial

variation in the expression of relevant grammatical features, motivated by the need to overtly express its meaning, decoded from the ST and the relevant grammatical and semantic features of the source language. A translator thus acts as a conscious agent in language change, and not by simply transferring linguistic structure from the source language, but rather by reflecting upon and re-thinking the structure and meaning of the TT. It is metalinguistic awareness of the speakers-translators that gives rise to non-trivial intervening into grammar and the production of meaning in their target language. With a community of such speakers-translators large enough, it is only a matter of accumulating quantity before it transforms into a new quality.

Usage-based emergentist approaches to language and grammaticalization (e.g., Bybee et al. 1994; Bybee & Hopper 2001) in a similar fashion point out the importance of statistical aspects of language use, such as probability and frequency, for the emergence of grammatical organization. In our case, however, neither usage nor frequency necessarily gives rise to non-trivial variations in the TT expression of grammar and meaning, but rather the translator's metalinguistic awareness that is developed out of interlinguistic textual (re)production. While it is probably true that success of a process of grammaticalization eventually depends on usage-based factors, we believe that conscious metalinguistic awareness on the part of the native speaker is a necessary precondition for any grammaticalization or semanticization process to happen. Ultimately, this means that all grammaticalization is in a sense "voluntary", as well as that in essence it derives from the native speakers' linguistic competence, not from performance.

As a language contact scenario, this allows for a possible explanation of the emergence of shared morphosyntactic features in the Balkansprachbund languages (so-called "Balkanisms"). Specificity/genericity itself is a rather good candidate for the status of an emergent morphosemantic Balkanism. As already pointed out, specificity is not entirely opaque in SCr and Turkish, languages on the periphery of this Sprachbund, where a morphological distinction in case marking is maintained in order to express (non-)specificity of direct object NPs. In Albanian, as well as in Balkan Slavic, specificity is "parasitic" on definiteness; however, here too, definite markers are in fact fused with case endings. So, for example, indirect object NPs that are marked for dative and definiteness and that trigger object reduplication on the verb are always specific. On the other hand, a direct object NP may be marked for accusative case and definiteness or not, and may trigger object reduplication or not, depending on whether it is specific (see Kallulli & Tasmowski 2008), just like in SCr and Turkish (save for object reduplication). It is also worth noting here that the grammaticalization of suffixed definite articles in Albanian, Balkan Slavic and Balkan Romance is notably recognized as "one of the oldest Balkanisms both in terms of possible attestation and in terms of identification as such" (Friedman 2003: 109), while Friedman also argues for areal grammaticalization of a Balkan indefinite marker, as well. (On the evolution of definiteness and indefiniteness and their links with specificity and genericity in the Balkan languages, see Mladenova 2007.)

However, the expression of (non-)specificity is not fully grammaticalized in languages of the Balkansprachbund, which is why the translator in examples (1–8) has had to make non-trivial choices in the expression of other grammatical features, such as number or degree, in order to communicate (non-)specific and generic NPs. By doing so, the translator of (1–8) shows how, in multilingual settings such as the Balkans, shared grammatical and semantic features could have emerged in frequent intertextual translation and interlinguistic communication. Namely, speakers of the Balkan languages may have acted as conscious agents of language change, by reflecting upon the structures of different languages and becoming aware of the possible means to express the desired meanings (such as definiteness, specificity or genericity, topicality, modality, futurity, evidentiality, possession, etc.) in their own languages, thus initiating various grammaticalization processes that have involved native linguistic material, rather than simply borrowing or unidirectionally calquing grammatical structures from one language to another (see, e.g., Božović 2017 for one such semantically motivated grammaticalization analysis of another shared construction in Albanian and SCr/Balkan Slavic). Lindstedt (2000) makes a similar point, seeing the rise of Balkanisms as a kind of “mutual reinforcement”:

[L]inguistic Balkanization was initiated by speakers who were bilingual or multilingual to such an extent that in their speech there were transfers not only from, but also into their native languages and who for that reason favoured features that made it easier to identify structures across languages (Lindstedt 2000: 241)

Again, the necessary precondition for such “mutual reinforcement” scenario is the existence of conscious metalinguistic awareness on the part of multilingual speakers-translators; as Lindstedt puts it: “The main mechanism of change must have been interference phenomena in the minds of multilingual individuals” (ibid.). It is the multilingual practice of (re)producing texts (in the Balkans, e.g., folk tales or oral songs that have easily been crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries back and forth) that makes speakers-translators consciously reflect upon their structure and meaning and look out for grammatical and semantic features available to them in their target (native) languages to express the desired meanings, ultimately giving rise to the grammaticalization and emergence of shared morphosyntactic features.

Finally, this could explain why there are no phonological Balkanisms in the same sense as there are plenty morphosyntactic ones. As the initial motivation is in fact semantic or pragmatic, i.e. the communication of desired meanings in different contexts imposed on by the STs, and ultimately directed toward morphosyntax, i.e. looking out for emerging structural features capable of carrying meaning, bilingual speakers-translators need not reflect upon the phonology of either the source or the target language.

Friedman proposes a sociolinguistic explanation for the lack of widespread phonological convergences in the Balkans:

Unlike convergences in lexicon and morphosyntax, most [Balkan] phonological convergences are highly localized [...] Thus we can speak more of Balkan phonologies rather than Balkan phonology [...] It would appear that in the B[alkan] L[inguistic] A[rea] some aspects of phonology function as identity markers that resist convergence (Friedman 2011: 278)

However, if Balkansprachbund morphosyntactic convergences are a result of frequent practice of intertextual translation by multilingual speakers-translators having metalinguistic awareness of grammar and semantics rather than phonology, then there is no need for supplying sociolinguistic factors in explaining away the lack of phonological convergences, simply because phonology is not there to begin with.

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