



An Analysis on ESP Students' Preposition Errors (The Case of Legal Translation)

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Abstract

The article analyzes preposition errors by university students at the introductory course of legal translation, as well as the causes of such errors. The author gives an overview of the legal translation course, including, inter alia, general conditions of teaching, requirements as for selection of legal texts for learning purposes, the groups under study. Students' written translations from Russian into English served as material for analysis. The research incorporates comparative analysis of the system of prepositions in English and Russian based on the typological differences of the languages and the corresponding sublanguages of legal documents in particular. The study relied on the following methods: analysis and synthesis, classification and description, comparative analysis, and continuous sampling technique. The data interpretation provided for description of error zones caused by interlanguage interference, the ontogenetic complexity of preposition usage, and individual difficulties of students. It concludes with the major causes of faults that give rise to errors on the levels of reception, storage, restoration, use, and metacognition. The paper recommends raising students' awareness as a means that can assist in reducing the preposition errors.

Keywords: ESP, error correction, preposition errors, legal translation;

1. Introduction

The learner's language has been recently widely investigated. There are papers in the framework of theory of errors from the perspectives of language pedagogy, psycholinguistics, and psychology. Moreover, there are studies analyzing various aspects of errors, their causes and types manifested in different conditions and as seen by learners of different languages. The main bulk of such research lies within the area of English as a foreign language and English as a second language. Researchers from different countries speculate on characteristics of language acquisition and errors made in English by speakers of other languages. Among those mentioned one can find a substantial number of studies revealing peculiarities of written and oral errors, including systematic ones and occasional or accidental [5; 8; 9], correcting grammatical and lexical errors in texts written by second language authors [13], the ones that can be useful in the description of an interim language [1], those typical for school and university students [16] etc.

The issues of interference are thoroughly studied mainly those concerning negative interlanguage type thereof. Additionally, linguistics and methodologists have developed a number of classifications, generalizations and typologies of foreign language learners' errors [6; 14; 17]. Some focus on errors that can hardly be treated as typical but rather as those caused by individual difficulties, including inter alia the personal characteristics of memory, perception, intellect etc. [10], foreign languages mastered before or being learnt at the same time [18]. Academics elaborate techniques of modelling errors based on the data represented in the contemporary research on errors [10].

Publications on legal English can not be treated as system-based but rather focusing on private issues: grammar difficulties, the issues of equivalency, translation techniques, the cases of synonymy, analysis of various legal sublanguages [12], and many other separate matters. There are articles dealing with prepositions in legal English texts, mainly based on corpus-based studies, which constitute the quantitative comparison analysis of prepositions in either legal documents of different jurisdictions or some of them also imply different languages [3]. There are studies with a special focus on translating particular types of prepositions [15], or those applying certain approaches to correcting prepositions [11], however, all of them deal with English for general purposes. As for translating Russian prepositions into English we have not revealed studies focusing on analysis of the corresponding errors. As for general studies we can refer to just few, elaborating on features of Russian prepositions revealed when teaching Russian prepositions to speakers of other languages [4].

We have already undertaken attempts to classify errors by Russian speakers in legal translation in general [7]. The present article focuses on preposition errors made by Russian speakers when translating texts of Russian contracts from Russian into English. The analysis presupposes preliminary typological comparison of the system of Russian and English prepositions specific to the texts of contracts.

2. Methods

The groups of students selected to be analyzed included second year university students. During the previous year they studied English for general purposes (one hour and thirty minutes per day, five days a week, the first year comprised 18 months of the first semester and 16 months of the second semester). The written translations were collected and summarized during the third semester (18 weeks, with 1,5 hours for legal translation and 8,5 hours for general English). The total number of students was 31.

The students under observation were grouped according to the efficiency of their work in the group, subgroups, and in pairs. The students were also characterized as having the approximate similarity as for the speed of material processing, perception, memory etc. and the similar level of the English language (78-93%), with all subcomponents of their communicative language competence being equally developed (sociocultural, sociolinguistic, linguistic, discursive, with strategic being the least developed).

When selecting the teaching material for legal translation purposes apart from federal standards and those of the University the students studied at (Moscow State Institute of International Relations) (those of general character) we relied on professional realism approach introduced by J. Biel [2]. The approach provides for the materials (legal documents) to be present in most jurisdictions, in high demand for employers, those frequently translated for market purposes. The data stipulated by J. Biel and our own investigation into the Russian legal translation market let us come to the conclusion that the type corresponding to the principle of professional realism is contract.

For teaching purposes we limited the number of contract types and adapted them according to the general adaptation rules accepted for ESL / EFL purposes. The types of contract included the following (as well as several varieties thereof): guarantee agreement, sale and purchase agreement, lease agreement, work contract, insurance policy, agency agreement.

The texts of the corresponding contracts were shortened in general approximately by 35-40% at the initial stage and by 20-15 % at the interim and final stages (mainly the repetitive passages). The percentage of unfamiliar words was increased by 0,3—0,5%. The interim stage included in general 4,5-5% of unknown words and collocations, these calculations were made excluding word derivatives etc.

The research was conducted applying the complementary methods of analysis and synthesis of theoretical foundations of the issues under study. Classification methods were also applied to analyze the preposition errors revealed. The method of description, as well as compare and contrast analysis were used to characterize English and Russian prepositions in the texts of contracts. Continuous sampling technique provides for selection of all prepositions spotted in the texts of Russian contracts (including cases with homonyms). This technique ensures the real distribution of prepositions in the texts. Another application of the technique concerned collection of students' preposition errors in translations of contracts from Russian into English. Upon application of continuous sampling technique the data received were further analyzed, cases with homonymy, technical errors, misspelled prepositions, instances with syntactical transformation of sentences and clauses students resorted to for translation purposes were excluded.

3. Discussion

Upon the end of the third semester we had collected translations of 12 different contracts made by each student. 261 errors were revealed, after we discarded repetitions, accidental errors, cases of syntactical transformations eliminating the necessity of using prepositions, misspelled prepositions the remaining prepositions were divided into those of ontogenetic character (the ones predetermined by the complexity of prepositions of the English legal texts), caused by internal and external interference, as well as individual difficulties of students.

Despite the differences in typology of the Russian and English languages English and Russian contacts have a few points of contact. First of all, these are relations they denote, mostly: spatial,

temporal, causal, purpose-oriented, possessive, limiting. Secondly, relations between objects and subjects and relations thereof to actions, states, quality. Another similarity is parts of speech they are used with: nouns, prepositions, substantive adjectives, numerals used with verbs, nouns, prepositions, and adverbs. One more common feature is the morphological composition of prepositions: simple, complex, compound.

The differences are caused by flexion system of the Russian language and a very scarce system of flexions in English; a complex case system of the Russian language and few cases in English. The government of verbs and nouns follows different logic in English and Russian, including cases of double government, zero preposition cases. Another problem zone is differences in syntax, especially manifested in enumeration patterns, the word order determining the place of a preposition in the sentence, especially in questions.

The interchangeable prepositions usually have either semantic or stylistic differences. Such cases as (on/upon) in English, in Russian these are mostly «в» и «во», «с» и «со» etc. As well as those interchangeable in certain contexts such as “at” and “by” in English, frequently related to the verb government, or “within” and “in” which denote a change in meaning corresponding to Russian «в течении», «через».

Complex idiomatic types of prepositions, such as phraseological units, clichés, archaic prepositions or any other usage of prepositions which is stylistically predetermined («оплачиваемый приказу», «в дату») are constant roots of errors. However, compound prepositions and prepositional phrases have more specific meanings than simple and complex non-compound prepositions, that is why the frequency of errors with such prepositions is lower. Students also make fewer errors when the temporal and spatial relationships of prepositions are not interrupted by indirect transferred meaning of the verb.

In case of synonymic compound prepositions, a frequent cause of errors is when students confuse prepositions used in different similar compound prepositions (“в отношении” can be translated “regarding with”/ “in respect to”/ “in accordance to”/ “according with”). Similarity with other parts of speech, mainly verbal adverbs, nouns, conjunctions, adverbs repeatedly gives rise to errors. Multivalent prepositions and cases when there are no equivalents in English are causes of frequent errors as well.

There are instances when rules of translation provide for a necessity to change the syntactic pattern containing a preposition, including changes of passive patterns into active, or changes of a subject. In such situations students frequently do not resort to the required transformations, which is an additional cause of errors.

Internal interference is mainly predetermined by the previous and parallel courses of English for general purposes. The most frequent errors contradicting the generalized rules acquired by students are those denoting cases. During the preceding course of general English students learn that genitive case is denoted by preposition “of”, hence, they commonly make errors such as “party of a contract”, “shares of the company” instead of prepositions “to”, and “in” to be used correspondingly.

Various types of errors are to some extent caused by undeveloped, underdeveloped metacognitive, prognostic, transfer skills, usage of references. Individual difficulties students encounter can be determined by their temper, attention span, efficiency of their verbal memory, involuntary memory, consciousness and unconsciousness of memorization, their reaction, reception.

4. Conclusions

For the purposes of our study we focused on texts of Russian contracts selected to be translated into English. Contracts were chosen subject to the principle of professional realism as applied to the Legal English classroom. The texts were adapted as for the length and complexity of syntactic patterns and intensity of unfamiliar vocabulary.

Translation of prepositions from Russian into English is very complex and is fraught with difficulties for Russian learners of legal English and as such causes a number of errors. The error are those predetermined by genuine difficulties of a legal text – syntactic patterns prepositions are used in, government of verbs and nouns, cases used with different types of speech and prepositions, multivalence of prepositions mostly predetermined by context, stylistic peculiarities of legal texts determining the usage of prepositions.

Thus, it is recommended both for teachers of legal translation and language learners, in case of autonomous learning, to analyze original texts before translating them, adopting a particular technique of reading for translating purposes. Such analysis shall reveal the corresponding typological



difficulties of the original and target languages, ways to translate zero equivalence cases, multivalent terms, stylistically predetermined passages, complex syntactical patterns. In case of translating prepositions in the texts of contracts, the zones of potential errors are limited by the type of this legal document and the corresponding subtypes. The number of prepositions used in Russian contracts is also limited as well as the contexts they are used in. Thus, preliminary work with the potential error zones can contribute to prevention of most and major errors in students' translations.

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