

The Unavoidable Whirlpool “Google Translate”

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Abstract

This paper treats one of the nowadays problems the translation faces today, which is translation of different documents using the “google translate” method. The paper emphasizes the fact that the majority of people in Albania who need translation for several purposes, usually do this by using the “google translate” machine on the internet, which is wrong due to the linguistic and communicative mistakes it imposes. Furthermore, such users do not worry about the very bad quality of these outputs which contain syntactical, spelling and communicative errors.

By approaching different text types analysis, this paper tries to shed light on the real translation problems found on target texts, problems which are deteriorated by the fact that these final target texts are not edited at all by their users in order to improve them and avoid the communicative blunts in the target language.

The article raises the concern about the great usage of such wrong translation materials by the university students, and not only, as a way of translating their course assignments or graduating thesis. The paper considers this concern important and legitimate to raise awareness on its users, in order to avoid such bad translations for the sake of serious work.

Key words

google translate, source text, target text, unavoidable, whirlpool

1. Introduction

Nowadays English language has turned into a must for everyone, in any area of life. There are a variety of texts and materials in English which need to be understood into Albanian, starting from the use of mobile phones by millions of users, students assignments and projects they have to prepare for their university courses, and continuing with lecturers’ and researchers’ articles which need to be written or translated into English, in order to be published in international bulletins or journals. In any case it is indispensable the translation of these texts into Albanian or vice-versa, into English.

2. Possible options?

There are some options for their translation: *First option* is to have really good knowledge of English language within your area of career and to make your own translation. *The second option* would be, that if you needed a short document to be translated, but you could not do it yourself because your foreign language knowledge is limited, you could go and ask a friend to do it for you for free. *A third option* might be to go and ask a professional translator to do it for you, but the majority of people in the place I live avoid this, as they have to pay for it. This is

done only when the document is a very important one, usually a legal document, or if the company or project investors are going to pay for its translation. *The fourth option*, which seems to be the most widespread (in Albania at least!) is using the *google translate* method which offers “solutions” for everyone, just in the blink of an eye, no matter how long the material you want to translate is. And above all, you do not have to pay anything at all for your translation.

Isn't this the solution we are all looking for? Quick translated versions of the materials we want, just in the last moment before we have to submit a paper for publication, an assignment or another document, a university or a job application? Your work is done in the flash of a light and there are hardly any people who are going to read your translated material into Albanian or in English for language accuracy, sentence structure, naturalness in translation and above all the transmission of the same message from source language to the target one. This is the solution, which is unfortunately used by a lot of students of different branches in our university, including even the students of the Department of Foreign Languages, for translating materials which they need for different course assignments, or even worse, when they are preparing their graduation thesis.

Despite the very bad quality translation of these materials into Albanian language, one can also notice the lack of our spelling letters like *ë* or *ç*²⁹ in the translated versions, which are not included in the usual computer keyboards, but they are found in the symbols category of any type of computer. Additionally, the sentence structures are a total disaster (as Albanian language has a different word order from English), or even worse, these versions lose their meaning or naturalness in our language at all. A lot of these google translated versions are delivered to the course lecturers for correction and evaluation then...

3. The powerful search engine “google translate”

Although there are a lot of CAT tools which facilitate the job of professional translators nowadays, it seems that *google translate* is undoubtedly the mostly used by the general mass of internet users, who need to translate different texts for their own purposes from one language to another as the most widely spread method, the easiest accessible by everyone and above all fast and free! But how accurate is the translation from source to target language using this computer method and can it be recommended for any typology of text?

Newmark [Newmark, 1988:196] emphasizes: “...*You know that the computer is useful for translation, in particular for LSPs (Language for specific purposes), that at present it can generally handle only “informative” texts and administrative texts, and that its output needs some kind of editing.*(idem) *Clearly the more restricted the language and the greater the proportion of standard or technical terms, the more likelihood there is of Machine Translation being acceptable....”*

²⁹ The letters *ë* and *ç* are part of Albanian alphabet and Albanian spelling rules and they should be written as such in different word, as Albanian is a language which is written as it is spoken.

As a university lecturer I have asked the students during translation studies course exams, in Bachelor Degree, to translate different types of texts, except answering questions on the theoretical part. Taking into consideration their translations, I have observed that except the students who make a serious attempt to give good versions of translation, there is still a certain number of them who secretly translate them by using *google translate* method and writing these translations as part of their answers.

The paradox is that the students are allowed to use dictionaries during translation exams, but, some of them prefer the shortest and prohibited way: google translate on their mobiles. Is it worth the risk?

4. Google translation versus human translation.

To illustrate the previous ideas and to see how they work in practice two different extracts of text types are analyzed below from the translation point of view. These extracts were used during the seminars of translation course in the university where I work. Students were asked to analyze and then to translate them from English into Albanian.

Text.1 Advertisement – (Informative text)

The following extract is taken from the online *Lancome* advertisement for its perfume “*La vie Est Belle*”. The extract gives a description of the ingredients of this perfume and how it makes its distinction from the other perfumes offered by this prestigious company.

La Vie Est Belle is a new Lancome fragrance, available on the market from fall 2012. The concept of this fragrance is centered on the idea of natural and simple beauty, freedom from conventions and the choice of once own vision of happiness.. This gourmand yet elegant composition is developed by perfumers Olivier Polge, Dominique Ropion and Anne Flipo. The final formula is the result achieved after three years of probation and 5000 versions. Iris is the key ingredient of the perfume, surrounded by orange blossoms and jasmine in the heart. The composition's opening provides fruity flavors of black currant and pear, while the base is warm, gourmand and powdery due to almond-like accords of tonka bean, praline, patchouli and vanilla..

[<http://www.fragrantica.com/perfume/Lancome/La-Vie-Est-Belle-14982.html>]

Albanian translation by “ google translate ”	Albanian translation by students
<i>La Vie Est Belle është një aromë e re Lancome, në dispozicion në treg nga rënia 2012. Koncepti i kësaj aromë është përqëndruar në idenë e bukurisë natyrore dhe të thjeshtë, lirisë nga konventat dhe zgjedhjen e</i>	<i>“La Vie Est Belle” është parfumi më i ri i Lancome-it i hedhur në treg në vjeshtën e vitit 2012. Koncepti i kësaj arome përqëndrohet në idenë e bukurisë së thjeshtë dhe natyrale, largimit nga tradicionalja dhe</i>

<i>vizionit dikur vet e lumturisë.. Kjo llupës ende përbërja elegant është zhvilluar nga parfumiere Olivier Polge, Dominique Ropion dhe Anne Flipo. Formula e fundit është rezultati i arritur pas tre viteve të provës dhe 5000 versione. Iris është përbërës kryesor i parfum, rrethuar me lule portokalli dhe jasemini në zemër. Hapja e përbërjes së ofron shije me shije frute e rrush pa fara i zi dhe dardhës, ndërsa baza është e ngrohtë, llupës dhe pluhur për shkak të bajame-si marrëveshjet e bathë tonka, Praline, patchouli dhe vanilje.</i>	<i>zgjedhjes së gjithësecilit për vizionin e tij të lumturisë.</i> <i>Formula përfundimtare e parfumit është rezultati i tre viteve punë të palodhur dhe 5000 versioneve të krijuara. Zambaku është përbërësi kryesor i parfumit, i rrethuar me lule portokalli dhe jasemine në zemër. Aroma fillestare e parfumit është aromë stafidheje të zezë dhe dardhe, ndërsa baza është e ngrohtë për shkak të pranisë së tonkës, që ngjason me bajamen, pralinës, dhe vaniljes.</i>
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If someone skimreads the Albanian version offered by *google translate* even if he has no knowledge of translation at all, can understand quite easily how meaningless and how many grammatical, syntactical, or spelling mistakes does the translated version offered by google contain. In a lot of cases the words are translated just by their denotative meaning which seem to be meaningless and totally out of context. Despite errors in information, another thing which can be noticed in the translated version is that the word word and the sentence structures seem illogical and paradoxal as well. e.g “ *Hapja e përbërjes së ofron shije me shije frute e rrush pa fara i zi dhe dardhës, ndërsa baza është e ngrohtë, llupës dhe pluhur për shkak të bajame-si marrëveshjet e bathë tonka, Praline, patchouli dhe vanilje.*”

If I give a **back translation** of this Albanian sentence into English, we would have: “*If we open this composition, fruit taste, black currant, pear, whereas base is warm, dust and gourmand because of almonds, agreement and tonka bean, praline, patchuli and vanilla*³⁰”.

So this sentence, seems totally irrelevant whereas the version given by the student is much more logical and meaningful, though there are still some things which need to be considered again. “*Aroma fillestare e parfumit është aromë stafidheje të zezë dhe dardhe, ndërsa baza është e ngrohtë për shkak të pranisë së tonkës, që ngjason me bajamen, pralinës, dhe vaniljes.*”

Back translation: “*Composition’s opening is of black currant and pear flavour, while the base is warm due to the presence of tonka bean which is similar to almond, patchulli and vanilla*”

³⁰ This is a back translation based on the Albanian version which in fact seems more meaningless due to the word for word translation and different word order it has from English.

Text 2. Literary text.

The following text, is another extract which is worked during the seminars, where the translation offered by google translate is not appropriate and does not come into one's help, because we have to do with a literary text where the words are used figuratively and the stylistic scale has to be conveyed correctly and as near the original as possible, a thing which *google translate* can not do of course.

In my own world

"I spent a great deal of time inside myself, as if in my own world, screened off from everything else. But there was no world there inside me, only a kind of nothing layer, a neither-nor, a state of being hollow without being empty or filled without being full. It just was, inside myself. This emptiness wasn't tormenting in itself. I was inside the emptiness and the emptiness was inside me – no more than that. It was nothing but an extension of time – I was in that state and it just went on. But the sense of unreality and of always being wrong when I was out in the world, outside myself, was harder to bear".

<i>Albanian translation by Google translate</i>	<i>Albanian translation by students</i>
<i>"Kam kaluar një pjesë të madhe të kohës brenda vetes sime, si në qoftë se në botën time, të ndara nga çdo gjë tjetër. Por nuk kishte asnjë botën aty brenda meje, vetëm një lloj asgjë shtresë, një as-as, një shtet për të qenë zgavrën pa qenë i zbrazët apo e mbushur pa qenë i plotë. Ajo sapo ishte, brenda vetes sime. Kjo zbrazëti dhe zbrazëti ishin brenda meje - jo më shumë se kaq. Kjo ishte gjë tjetër veçse një zgjatje të afatit - Unë kam qenë në atë gjendje dhe vetëm ajo vazhdoi. Por ndjenja e irealitet dhe e gjithmonë duke qenë i gabuar kur unë isha jashtë në botë, jashtë veten time, ishte e vështirë të mbajnë".</i>	<i>Në botën time.</i> <i>Kalova shumë kohë i mbyllur në vetvete, brenda botës time, i shkëputur nga gjithçka tjetër. Por nuk kishte botë brenda meje, vetëm një shtresë kotësie, as më shumë e as më pak, por një gjëndje ku isha i zbrazur pa qenë bosh, e i mbushur pa qenë plot. Kjo gjëndje mbizotëronte në botën time. Kjo zbrazëti ishte brenda meje dhe unë isha brenda saj, dhe asgjë më shumë se kaq. Nuk ishte asgjë tjetër veçse një shtrirje në kohë. Unë isha në këtë gjëndje dhe ajo thjesht vazhdonte... Por ndjesia e irrealitetit dhe e faktit që gjithmonë gaboja kur isha në botën e vërtetë, jashtë botës sime, ishte e vështirë për t'u përtypur.</i>

In *google translate* version can be easily noticed the numerous mistakes in meaning and the disaccordance with the original. These sentences are not correct into Albanian not only from the logical point of view, but even from the syntactical

one. For example, let us consider the sentence “*Kjo zbrazëti dhe zbrazëti ishin brenda meje - jo më shumë se kaq*”. **Back Translation-** *This emptiness and emptiness were inside me-nothing more than that.* As it seems, it does not make sense due to the usage of the same noun **zbrazëti (emptiness)** twice which seems irrelevant and meaningless here.

The most challenging and problematic sentence to be translated into Albanian, seems to be the second sentence, for the complexity it offers not only to convey the right meaning, but also to preserve the author’s style as much as possible. The translation offered by *google* contains a lot of errors and seems meaningless, whereas the translation made by the student seems more correct, and she has made attempts to be as nearer the original as possible in preserving the meaning of the ST.

Google translation: *Por nuk kishte asnjë botën aty brenda meje, vetëm një lloj asgjë shtresë, një as-as, një shtet për të qenë zgavrën pa qenë i zbrazët apo e mbushur pa qenë i plotë.*

Back translation: *But there was no world there inside me, only a kind of nothing, a nothing nothing, a country to be hole without being empty or filled without being full)*

Student’s translation: *Por nuk kishte botë brenda meje, vetëm një shtresë kotësie, as më shumë e as më pak, por një gjëndje ku isha i zbrazur pa qenë bosh, e i mbushur pa qenë plot.*

Back translation: *But there was no world inside me, only a nothing layer, nothing more or nothing less, but a state where I felt hollow without being empty, or filled without being full.*

One can notice the same thing even in the rest of the text, where it can easily be noticed that student’s translation seems much more correct and more meaningful than the translation offered by *google translate*. In my opinion, its absolutely irrelevant to use *google translate* versions for the translation of literary texts due to the figurative and metaphoric use of the language in such kind of texts, not to mention their stylistic scale as well. We have to emphasize here that *google translate* is programmed in such a way as to operate only with the denotative meanings of the words, and not their connotative ones. This can be seen in the translation of word **state**, which in Albanian is given with its first meaning, a **country**, which is of course far from the original which means **a condition or mode of being**. That’s why it seems inappropriate and meaningless in literary texts.

5. Conclusions

As it can be noticed from the translations of the above extracts made by *google translate*, there is much need for comment on the very bad quality of these translations.

The question which can be raised in this case is why should such a computer program exist when the translation it offers are generally wrong and above all, paradoxically, why is it used by so many internet users?

This happens because "Google Translate" is based on something called "statistical machine translation". This means that they gather as much text as they can find that seems to be parallel between two languages, and then they crunch their data to find the likelihood that something in Language A corresponds to something in Language B. In other words, for every word which belongs to A language, the computer automatically finds an equivalent in language B, as it is programmed to do specifically this thing. [<http://www.quora.com/How-does-Google-translate-work-Do-they-have-database-for-all-words-of-a-particular-language> Martin Benjamin, Lexicographer, Anthropologist, Tati]

But in fact this is the main problem and the "whirlpool" which attracts and sucks in the computer user. According to translation scholars it is almost impossible to find the perfect equivalence between two languages, as not every word or expression in language A can be translated and perceived the same by the users of language B, for the simple fact that every language has its own inner way of organising and its inner rules which simply refer to the users of that language. Furthermore, if we consider the fact that English language is a polysimantic one, where a word in a certain context can convey its third or fourth connotational meaning, not the first denotative meaning which the computer software contains, of course serious problems will appear in translated text. Additionally, if we refer to different culture perception problems carried by the users of source and target language for the same word, the problem became even more serious and the results are a total disaster.

The whirlpool "*google translate*", seems as if it is sucking in everyone who uses the modern technology for translation purposes, but is it worth sacrificing the good quality and style offered by professional translators for the sake of quick and free translations, no matter how wrong and meaningless they are ?

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