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Greek language in the age of globalisation

A translator's perspective

Abstract

Today's technological advancements have altered the way we communicate with each other both as individuals and on a global scale. This has greatly impacted on translation, which has become more widespread, visible and urgent. In response to an increased demand for efficient translation services, translators are now utilising computer technology software, from translation memories to machine translation tools, which facilitate the translation process but also introduce new challenges. The rapid dissemination of information in a globalised language services marketplace means that linguistic errors can greatly impact not only the translated text but the target language as a whole.

This article will focus on non-literary translation between English and Greek and its impact on the Greek language. I will be drawing upon my 15 years of professional translating experience in the Greek community of Sydney, NSW, Australia.

Translation and localisation

To be effective, translation must take into consideration the specific needs of its audience, their linguistic and cultural identity, level of fluency and comprehension. This cultural adaptation of translation is referred to as localisation. Whereas translation is often considered a mere language problem, localisation is viewed as a more elaborate form of translation, even though

in recent times, with 'developments in text linguistics, discourse analysis and greater attention to cultural and ethical problematics ... Translation Studies have allowed us to see interpersonal dynamics and cultural specificity as playing major roles in the solving of translation problems' (Pym 2004: 52). In the following discourse, the word translation will include the concept of localisation.

Source and target texts

There is currently high demand for fast and efficient translations, and a case in point is the vast database of translations undertaken in EU language pairs, including Greek and English. In an attempt to make the translation process cost-effective, the EU has sought 'normalisation' of documents to be translated, so that the source texts can be 'concise and clear' thus enabling a more standardised translating process and quality assessment. There has also been an intense focus on automation, which has seen a significant development in our approaches to machine translation, with Google Translate (<<http://translate.google.com/>>) now making great strides in that direction. Just like human translation, machine translation tends to be easier, and therefore performed more efficiently, when there is uniformity in source texts. This has obvious advantages, especially for 'weak', that is, less widely spoken languages (Σελλά 1996: 233-234), but can also lead to a decline of linguistic diversity and cultural nuances.

The exchange of information afforded by search engines such as Google has ensured remote sharing of new terminology. This, in turn, can also place constant and urgent demands on translators who have to decide how best to render the ever-changing English terminology into their respective target languages, by following a well-trodden process of investigating general and specialist dictionaries, other lexical references, web-based references, prior translations which can be found on the web (and enhance consistency), and if all else fails, create new equivalent terminology in the target language.

Frequently, newly developed terminology in a source language, often English, is urgently translated into a number of target languages, and translators are regularly called upon to develop equivalent terminology, often without due process. Tight deadlines present extra challenges and pose risks to the integrity of the translation process and the target language itself. This pressure is, more often than not, accentuated by a proliferation of cut-price translation agencies which dictate conditions without much consideration for quality.

Greek translation and localisation

Most translators in Australia have received their accreditation by passing a National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) test. NAATI accreditation is not a requirement for work in Australia, despite efforts to enforce it, and furthermore, there is no guarantee that a NAATI-accredited translator is a better practitioner than a non-accredited one, though this on average holds true.

In recent years, commercially-driven localisation of products and services sold in Greece and in diasporic communities outside Greece has created strong demand for translation services both in their countries of origin as well as in Greece. Many foreign and Australian companies have localised their products for sale in Greece by commissioning translations of manuals, brochures, advertising, medical, pharmaceutical and other materials locally, as they could oversee the process and retain more control in terms of quality assurance and assessment. As these companies expanded their markets to Greece, some established their business operations there and employed local translators.

This has been a two-way process and has allowed translators based in Greece access to foreign markets to such an extent that there are currently Australian Government departments working directly with translators and/or agencies based in Greece, mainly due to their lower fees and greater numbers. The Internet has fostered a global market for translation services and has facilitated language localisation. It has also made it possible for translators to build networks with other local and overseas practitioners mainly through websites like proz.com, but that has also meant increased competition for local practitioners.

Conversely, translators in Greek diasporic communities have also been making contributions to the linguistic development of the Greek language. Taking Australia as an example, there is often a need for rendering Australian terminology, for example, in sociology or the law, as Australia is often a pioneer in socioeconomic developments due to its generally progressive outlook and legislation, but also its unique multicultural mix.

Quality assessment

Quality assessment of translations is occasionally sought by advertising agencies on behalf of their clients, both in the government and private

sector. These translations may be of a general, specialised or technical nature, from English into Greek. This quality assessment is often organised either externally, through an independent translation agency not involved in the original translation process, or internally within the client organisation itself. This practice, known as ‘community testing’, normally involves a panel of Greek speakers, often gathered at random with no specific qualifications or expertise, who read and discuss a translation, sometimes without even referring to the original English text – thus not actually assessing the accuracy of the translation.

When quality assessment is undertaken internally, it is often performed by a single employee of Greek origin, typically a second-generation Greek, or someone considered ‘fluent’ in Greek by people who are not qualified to make that judgement, and regardless of their lack of linguistic qualifications, skills and/or expertise. Hence, the quality of a translation is not always assessed based on its accuracy or linguistic correctness, but on factors relating to the reviewer’s knowledge of vocabulary and syntax. The outcomes of such reviews can be time consuming and place an enormous burden on translators who are often required to ‘simplify a translation’, without being given any specific instructions from the reviewers on what simplifications are desired or what is considered hard to understand.

Reference materials

The lack of good bilingual Greek dictionaries, especially in electronic or accessible formats, remains a problem. Despite their shortcomings, ranging from complete absence of many common words, to only listing some of their meanings, and even significant errors, they are relied upon implicitly, primarily because of a stark lack of other options.

Attempts at standardising the translation of common terminology developed by Australian Government bodies, such as Centrelink and the Australian Taxation Office, have produced some sporadic results – such as the *Translated Lexicon of Centrelink Terms* which has now been discontinued – but they, too, are incomplete, arbitrary and in some cases incorrect (including wrong spelling/grammar). The current practice of treating glossary compilation projects as everyday translation assignments is problematic, and it is widely acknowledged that these projects should be submitted for feedback to evaluation forums consisting of accredited translators and

academics, before publication. One way to achieve this could be to issue an open invitation to all active NAATI-accredited translators to participate in a review panel.

The Internet is the main source of lexical help, and deciding the validity of such terminology rests with the translator. When sources are scarce and deadlines pressing, many translators will use any terminology they can find, even if it could be inappropriate for the context.

Conventions and trends

Greek communities outside Greece generally develop their own *ethnolect*, often incorporating words adapted from the dominant language of the host country. (Johnson 2010: 185) These elements are generally considered undesirable. A similar process occurs when certain Australianisms are translated into Greek: 'we are here to help', 'making the difference' et cetera, which provided they are not 'offensive' or hard to understand in the Greek language, end up being progressively incorporated into Greek.

The process of translation involves three main stages: *comprehension* and in-depth analysis of the source text; *interpretation*, where the translator deals with each individual problem and looks for intertextual equivalences by constantly referring to the source and target text; and finally *construction* of the target text, which is to a larger or lesser extent, equivalent to the source text, and its ultimate value determined by its target audience. (Connolly 1997: 18-21)

Making a translation aesthetically pleasing and naturally flowing in the target language often involves paraphrasing, which is standard practice for experienced practitioners. There is, however, a growing tendency in non-literary translation to focus on individual words instead of whole phrases or expressions, especially when there are no equivalents in the target language, or their translation is challenging. This literal approach is often adopted by inexperienced translators because it enables and/or facilitates the translation process, but ultimately has a detrimental effect on the target language.

Another perceived advantage of the all-too-literal approach is that it is more readily 'back-translated', which is a service frequently sought by organisations commissioning translations, in an attempt to avoid litigation if any mistranslation occurs. Back-translations can be useful for the purposes of avoiding major mistranslations, however, as experienced translators know, they should not be relied upon as an accurate measure of quality, or to assess the structure or syntax of the target text.

Examples of the literal approach

- GPs: the equivalent Greek term is *γιατροί παθολόγοι*. However, due to the different meanings of pathology and *παθολογία*, many translators use *οικογενειακοί γιατροί*, which may be fine when ‘family doctors’ does not appear in the same text (though it is clearly not accurate), and others use the calque *γενικοί γιατροί* which is now becoming more prevalent having already made its appearance on Greek medical websites.
- Fees: *αμοιβές*. The Greek word is perceived as signifying payment received rather than paid out, hence other words are often used, for example: *τιμές, χρεώσεις, τέλη, επιβαρύνσεις, et cetera*.
- Costs: *τέλη* (or *κόστη* or *κόστα*[!] – seen as *ιατρικά κόστα, επιπρόσθετα κόστα, κόστα κατασκευής et cetera*). Using the singular *κόστος* usually avoids most of the problems.

Examples of paraphrasing

- Separation Certificate (leaving one’s workplace): *Πιστοποιητικό Αποχώρησης* instead of *Πιστοποιητικό Αποχωρισμού*.
- Employment Pathway Plan: *Πρόγραμμα Επαγγελματικού Προσανατολισμού*.
- Check on elderly friends: *Ελέγχετε αν είναι καλά οι ηλικιωμένοι φίλοι*, instead of the misleading *Ελέγχετε τους ηλικιωμένους φίλους*.
- Community transport: *Κοινοτικά Μέσα Μεταφοράς*, instead of *Κοινοτική Μεταφορά*.
- Shuttle service: *Υπηρεσία Ειδικών Διαδρομών*.
- Sense of belonging & being connected: *Αίσθηση ότι ανήκουμε & είμαστε συνδεδεμένοι με την κοινωνία*.
- Mobile speed cameras. Capturing speeders: *Κινητές Κάμερες Ταχύτητας*. *Πιάνουν όσους υπερβαίνουν το όριο ταχύτητας* instead of the somewhat misleading *Παγιδεύουν αυτούς που τρέχουν* (which could also include runners).

Cultural sensitivities

- Funeral home: (established as) *Οίκος Τελετών* instead of *Οίκος Κηδειών*.

Multiple choices

- Diversity: ποικιλομορφία, πολυμορφία or διαφορετικότητα. The first two are established translations but the third is gaining ground.
- Culturally and linguistically diverse communities: Κοινότητες ποικιλόμορφης πολιτισμικής και γλωσσολογικής προέλευσης.
- Superannuation: επαγγελματική σύνταξη, επικουρική σύνταξη, ιδιωτική σύνταξη, σύνταξη από ταμείο, σύνταξη από επικουρικό ταμείο, σύνταξη από συνταξιοδοτικό ταμείο, εφάπαξ etc. To avoid confusion, some translators use direct transcription: σούπερ (which others consider totally unsatisfactory).
- Tribunal: Δικαστήριο, δικαστική επιτροπή, επιτροπή.

Established terms under constant review

The names of Australian Government departments or services necessitate a uniform translation in order to provide consistency and avoid confusion among users of the service. However, as different translators – who are occasionally new to the profession or even live overseas – are assigned updates of existing factsheets and brochures, a uniform translation cannot be guaranteed.

The Translating and Interpreter Service is a case in point, most often translated as *Υπηρεσία Μεταφραστών και Διερμηνέων* but also appearing in a number of other variants.

- Produce factsheets: συντάσσω, εκπονώ, καταρτίζω (or παράγω?) πληροφοριακά / ενημερωτικά φυλλάδια
- Comprehensive information: αναλυτικές (or περιεκτικές?) πληροφορίες
- Appeal: ένσταση ή έφεση; (depends on whether the case is heard by the Appeals Court (Εφετείο) – in most cases it is not, so the correct term is not έφεση)
- Authorised (text): εγκεκριμένο (κεείμενο) – but εξουσιοδοτημένο (άτομο)
- Magistrates Court: Πρωτοδικείο ('First Instance Court'?) (or Δικαστήριο?)

Australian locale

- Bush: δάσος, θαμνότοπος, θαμνώνας, θαμνώδης έκταση, ερημότοπος, αγριότοπος, φύση

- Wildlife: άγρια ζωή, άγρια φύση, άγρια ζώα
- Registered nurse: πτυχιούχος, διπλωματούχος (instead of εγγεγραμμένη) νοσοκόμα

A few examples of grammatical challenges in demotic

- Πληρούτε (Μπαμπινιώτης 2009: 1443), or the incorrect: πληροίτε or demoticized: πληρείτε?
- Παραγάγει (or παράξει? – but then, εξάξει, διεξάξει, μετάξει?). Some of these arise from an attempt to avoid diglossia but they adversely affect choice of expression.
- Interviewer/interviewee: ερωτών/ερωτώμενος; (the artificially-created συνεντευξιάζων/συνεντευξιαζόμενος are generally considered inappropriate as they are too long, aesthetically unpleasant to most people, and not user-friendly).

Greek linguistic policy issues

Some recent linguistic policies are now producing greater problems than those they endeavoured to solve. One of those has been an ad hoc adoption of phonetic rules in transcribing names, which has overturned decades of spelling conventions. For example, the spelling of Sydney, which had always been Σύδνεϋ has now been changed to Σίδνεϊ, having confused people so much that it is common to see it spelt as Σίδνεϋ or Σύδνεϊ – or even *Sidnei* in English characters – in official documents, books and map references.

This phonetic spelling may arguably be appropriate for common words being introduced into the Greek language, but not for names or place names already established (Σφυρόερα 2009: 230-237). Apart from the confusion such changes generate, they are also ineffective, as they produce less uniformity than the system they seek to replace, even though uniformity was the reason for their introduction in the first place.

Greek passports, for example, used to display proper names in Greek, French and English, but now they are displayed in Greek and transcribed into Latin letters, in the simplest possible phonetic way. So, instead of the English 'Athens' and French 'Athènes', now 'Athina' is displayed. Instead of 'Greece' or 'Greek Republic' or 'Republic of Greece', 'Hellenic Republic' is used. This is fine for internal consumption, but it is contrary to what passports are used for,

namely, travel abroad. The adoption of ‘Hellas’ and ‘Hellenic’ internationally may be a long-term re-branding strategy for Greece, but it causes confusion when Greek passports are used in countries outside of Greece.

More significantly, the names of expatriate Greeks now appear on Greek passports spelt in an arbitrary phonetic way, which in many cases, differs from their (normally reasonable) spelling under which they had been registered in their country of residence, which was also consistent with the spelling on their original Greek passports. For example, the name Μιχαήλ is now transcribed as Michail (instead of Michael), Αικατερίνη as Aikaterini instead of Catherine, Ekaterini etc., Σοφία as Sofia instead of Sophia, etc.

Surnames pose a far more serious problem. We have *Fragkos*, *Fragcos* or *Fraggos* instead of *Frangos*; *Oikonomidis* instead of *Economides* or *Economidis*; *Ntantas* instead of *Dadas*; but strangely, the lack of uniformity between *Giannakos* and *Yannakos* or *Yiannakos* still remains. A consequence of this is that the official Greek travel document, the Greek passport, cannot be used universally by diasporic Greeks for the purpose it has been issued, namely travel between countries, unless accompanied by a foreign passport where the person’s name is spelt correctly and consistently with other personal documents.

The transcription of place names on maps and signs also presents a problem, especially for a country dependent on tourism. Some examples are: Heraklion, Iraklion, Iraklio, Irakleio, Herakleio et cetera; Ilea, Ilea, Iliia, Elia et cetera; Epirus, Ipiros, Ipeiros et cetera; Evia, Euboea, Evoia, Euvoia et cetera. Signs of differently-spelt place names can even appear within the same Greek port or airport.

These problems arise from an ad hoc, confusing, ill-conceived and inflexible – though still inconsistent – attempt to rationalise a problem that has been haphazardly addressed before, but never really resolved. It seems clear that there is no single satisfactory solution and there is no consensus even among bureaucrats heading government departments. Hence different departments have different, occasionally clashing, policies (Φραγκάκης 2005: 35-46).

These types of sweeping and contradictory policy changes by successive administrations are impractical and affect many citizens, ending up being very costly in monetary and political terms, causing even more bureaucracy and undermining the authority of the country. Sadly, the real issues facing

the Greek language are swept under the carpet and no attempts are ever made to address them in a serious, consistent and intelligent manner, as there are always other, more pressing priorities.

Concluding remarks

With the new global market conditions in Europe, there are now new opportunities for Greece to become more accessible, or rather more realistically, less inaccessible to overseas markets. Some significant Greek books are still being printed on rough paper and/or exported uncut, making them hard and cumbersome to read. Greek books, literature and reference materials (such as dictionaries) need to become more visible and openly promoted. The range and scope of our bilingual dictionaries need to be extended and made accessible in many formats, including electronic/downloadable (for a fee), and adequately supported. Some companies are on the way to achieving some exposure, but the new technologies are not yet fully embraced and are still feared.

On the local front here in Australia, there is also a need to create a more connected, inclusive environment, for example through forums, where language professionals can discuss relevant issues as they arise, such as appropriate linguistic rendering of terminology (e.g. 'superannuation'). Such forums could be held at universities and aim to promote and facilitate the standardisation of terminology without limiting the scope of expression afforded to us in a rich, multi-layered language such as Greek. Targeted inclusive professional development courses could also be offered by universities to language professionals, regardless of their formal qualifications. This could assist in creating a more collaborative professional environment among translators, and encourage and mentor new practitioners.

In closing, translation remains a very vibrant, ever-changing profession. Whilst Google Translate is rapidly improving, there is a great need for qualified language professionals in translation, localisation, editing, lexicography and many other aspects of the translation process, and language professionals are still some way off from becoming obsolete. In the meantime, it is important to establish the means to negotiate any challenges arising from continuing advancements in technology, while preserving and enhancing the cultural integrity of the Greek language.

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