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A PRAGMATIC-BASED APPROACH TO TRANSLATION: *MI DAI?/DAMMI!* AND *ДАЙ!* IN THE PARALLEL RUSSIAN-ITALIAN CORPUS

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Abstract: This essay focusses on how the knowledge of cross-cultural pragmatics can provide a theoretical background for the translation practice, especially in the search for equivalent functions. This study concentrates on the Russian and the Italian languages and on the speech act of requesting, in that not only is request amongst the most frequent speech acts, but also it is realised in different ways in the two target languages. In particular, whereas imperative is a common strategy used in Russian requests, its presence is restricted to informal bilateral requests in the Italian-speaking contexts.

In order to investigate how the imperative is distributed in requests translated from Russian into Italian and vice versa, and whether such translations are appropriate from a pragmatic perspective, in our study we have analysed the occurrences of the imperative request ‘give (me)!’ in Russian (*дай!*) and Italian (*dammi!*) in the parallel Russian-Italian corpus of the National Corpus of the Russian Language.

Key words: pragmatics, Russian, Italian, parallel corpus, request

1. Introduction

One of the most challenging tasks of translation is to find proper strategies of compensation when the translation from the source language (SL) into the target language (TL) would result in a significant loss, especially when dealing with idiomaticity (Baker 1992:72–78). However, the scope of compensation goes beyond the boundaries of the lexicon and involves all the levels of linguistic analysis, among which is pragmatics. In particular, in this essay we will investigate to what extent a cross-cultural perspective on the speech act of *request* can be implemented in translation practices, and how pragmatic awareness can serve both as a theoretical basis and a practical tool in translation. In order to do so, we will first compare the strategies used to perform the speech act of *request* in Italian and Russian, and then explore the pragmatic felicity of a sample of translations from Russian to Italian and vice versa by analysing the *параллельный русско-итальянский корпус* ‘parallel Russian-Italian corpus’ (<http://www.ruscorpora.ru/new/search-para-it.html>), a sub-corpus of the National Corpus of the Russian Language (<http://www.ruscorpora.ru>).

2. The Politeness of Requests in Russian and Italian

Early studies on pragmatics concentrated on the assumption that to say something is to do something and any utterance has an intrinsic force that shapes reality; a sub-branch of pragmatics, known as *Speech Act Theory*, analyses the phenomenon from an interdisciplinary perspective (Austin 1962; Searle 1979). With regards to its linguistic features, a seminal contribution was provided by Brown and Levinson (1987), who integrated Goffman's (1967) notion of *face* – the social representation of the self – into the theory and elaborated the concept of *Face Threatening Act* (FTA), a speech act whose performance may result in face-loss, i.e., a socially inadequate situation for one or more participants in the communication. The authors realised that interlocutors perform a variety of strategies in order to avoid such face-loss, most of which are of linguistic nature. Brown and Levinson's (1987) *Politeness Theory* accounts for the linguistic choices made by the participants when dealing with FTA and how they vary according to (a) social distance between the interlocutors, (b) ranking of imposition, and (c) power.

Although these variables are universal, it is less so when it comes to the way different cultures perceive and realise FTA. Studies on cross-cultural pragmatics (see, for instance, Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989; Márquez-Reiter 2000; Ogiermann 2009; Rue and Zhang 2008) have demonstrated how the same speech act is performed according to culture specific preferences across different language contexts.

Defined as the act performed by a speaker who wants the hearer to do or refraining from doing some action (Searle 1969:66), *request* is the most common and salient speech act, as well as the most studied act from a cross-cultural perspective, in that avoiding face-loss while performing the FTA of *request* can refer to a variety of values, which are unlikely to be universal. In particular, Ogiermann (2009) has noticed that Anglo-Saxon-centred approaches tend to relate politeness with indirectness, whereas Eastern European languages – in particular Russian (Rathmayr 1994) – rely on directness and frankness rather than avoidance. Let us then move on how requests are formulated in the languages considered in this study, namely Russian and Italian.

Requesting in Russian is possible with both indirect and direct strategies, the former typically performed by modified interrogatives, the latter in the imperative mood. With regards to indirect strategies, a request in the form of interrogative can be modified by (1) the negative particle *не*, (2) the interrogative particle *ли*, (3) the conditional particle *бы*, (4) the combination of the negative and the interrogative particles, and (5) the combination of the negative and the conditional particles (Mills 1992). However, what is peculiar of Russian and other Eastern European languages is the widespread use of direct requests in the form of imperative, mitigated only by the politeness marker *пожалуйста* 'please'; imperative is among the most frequent strategies used in Russian (Ogiermann 2009), if not the most common one (Rathmayr 1994; Berger 1997; Dorodnych 1995; Larina 2003; Betsch 2003; Brehmer 2006).

Unlike Russian, requests in Italian are unlikely to be expressed by the imperative. The most frequent strategies used in Italian requests are interrogatives – often modified by negation and/or the modal verb *potere* 'can' – and declaratives in conditional mood or imperfective past tense (Nuzzo 2007). As demonstrated by Rossi (2012), imperative

can be used only in informal contexts restricted to bilateral requests, i.e., when the request pertains a project the recipient has previously committed to. Conversely, in case of informal unilateral requests, i.e., when the requirement concerns a new topic, Italians tend to use the *mi X?* construction – an interrogative preceded by the clitic benefactive *mi* ‘to me/for me,’ as in *mi daresti una penna?* ‘would you give me a pen?’

In sum, from a cross-cultural perspective, we have noticed how the speech act of request in Italian and Russian is realised with different strategies. With reference to the interplay between pragmatics and translation, we are interested in investigating how imperative, a grammatical category present in both languages, is distributed in translations of requests from Italian to Russian and vice versa, as the two languages display different tendencies. Whereas previous studies on pragmatics and translation concentrated on the cultural adaptation when translating speech acts (e.g. Saxena 2002 on translating English requests in Kinnauri), the translation of pragma-linguistic features (e.g. Hervey 1998 on illocutionary functions and particles in English, Hungarian and German), and the evaluation of translations in cultural products (e.g. Bruti 2006 on film subtitles), in this study we will investigate the pragmatic felicity of the translations collected in a parallel corpus, mainly focussing on the use of imperatives in requests.

3. An Exploratory Corpus-Based Study

As mentioned in the previous section, the use of imperatives in requests is very common in Russian, whereas it is limited to informal bilateral requests in Italian. It follows that, when translating from Italian to Russian or vice versa, a lack of knowledge in the pragmatics of both languages might result in infelicitous translations – typically an authoritative imperative in Italian TL and an unnecessary hyper-polite construction in Russian TL. In order to investigate the pragmatic felicity of requests in translation from Italian to Russian and vice versa, we decided to concentrate on the most prototypical request in the imperative mood, i.e. *дай!* ‘give’ and *dammi!* ‘give me’ – together with its unilateral counterpart *mi dai?* ‘give for me/to me’ – and search for its translation in the *параллельный русско-итальянский корпус* ‘parallel Russian-Italian corpus’ (<http://www.ruscorpora.ru/new/search-para-it.html>), a sub-corpus of the National Corpus of the Russian Language, which includes 2,791 documents and 98,201,542 words.

The quantitative results of the search for the three items (the two imperatives *dammi* and *дай* and the unilateral *mi dai*) are shown in Table 1.

	<i>Dammi!</i> imperative	<i>Mi dai?</i> Mi X?	<i>Дай!</i> imperative
RUS to ITA	96	9	202
ITA to RUS	7	4	32
Total	103	13	234

Table 1: Distribution of tokens in the parallel Italian-Russian corpus according to SL and TL

Considering the unbalanced weight between SL and TL – the number of documents with Russian SL outstrips the ones with Italian SL – it is worth noticing that *dammi!* is more frequently used in translations from Russian than in texts with Italian as a SL. However, in order to account for the pragmatic felicity of the translation, we should consider the context in which the utterance is performed.

The search for the imperative “*dammi*” produced 103 results, 96 of which have Russian as a SL, and only 7 with Italian as a SL. The few occurrences of *dammi* in the Italian original texts either include direct commands – and thus cannot be considered as requests (see, for instance, example 1) – or informal bilateral requests (example 2).

- (1) *Valerio Massimo Manfredi. Aléxandros III, il confine del mondo (1998) | Валерио Массимо Манфреди. Александр Македонский. Пределы мира (Михаил Кононов)*

ITA: *Dammi la tua spada*
‘give me [*imperative*] your sword’

RUS: *Дай мне твой меч*
‘give me [*imperative*] your sword’

- (2) *Alessandro Baricco. Novecento (1994) | Алессандро Барикко. Легенда о пианисте (Наталья Колесова, 2005)*

ITA: *lui si piegò verso di me e mi disse: “Dammi una sigaretta, va’...”*
‘he bended towards me and said: “give me [*imperative*] a cigarette, come on...”’

RUS: *Он наклонился ко мне и сказал: «Дай мне сигарету, ну...»*
‘he bended towards me and said: “give me [*imperative*] a cigarette, come on...”’

Not surprisingly, the infrequent Italian imperative *dammi!* is always translated with an imperative in Russian, which is always felicitous in the abovementioned contexts. Let us now consider when *dammi!* is the outcome of a translation from Russian SL. The example (3) shows how an informal bilateral request with the imperative *дай* in the SL was translated in Italian TL with *dammi*, an appropriate solution in pragmatic terms.

- (3) *Сергей Довлатов. Филиал (1987) | Sergej Dovlatov. La filiale New York (Laura Salmon)*

RUS: - *O, дай мне власть, — шептал Зарецкий, — и я тебя прославлю!*
‘- Oh, give me [*imperative*] power – Zaretsky whispered – and I’ll glorify you!’

ITA: - *Oh, dammi il potere — sussurrava Zareckij — ed io ti glorificherò!*
‘- Oh, give me [*imperative*] power – Zaretsky whispered – and I’ll glorify you!’

In (3) it is clear how the imperative concerns a bilateral request, in which both participants agreed on a plan (A gives power to B, B glorifies A). However, other translations in the corpus, as the ones in (4) and (5), introduce the imperative *dammi* as a calque of the Russian *дай*, even if the situation is neither a direct command nor a

bilateral requests. The following translations result in pragmatic violations, as the Italian imperative triggers a directive reading, which threatens the face of the recipient(s). In order to compensate the threat caused by the requests, a more pragmatically felicitous translation could have been formed by the more indirect structure *mi X?*

- (4) Л. Н. Толстой. *Анна Каренина (1873-1877)* | Lev Tolstoj. *Anna Karenina (Maria Bianca Luporini)*

RUS: **Подай** еще бутылку, – сказал он лакею и начал рассказывать
'Give me [*imperative*] a bottle more, – he said to the valet and started talking'

ITA: **Dammi** un'altra bottiglia — disse al cameriere e prese a raccontare.
'Give me [*imperative*] another bottle, – he said to the waiter and started talking'

- (5) Андрей Курков. *Закон улитки (2005)* | Andrej Kurkov. *I Pinguini non vanno in vacanza (Bruno Osimo)*

RUS: – **Дай** телефончик – позвоню! – предложила Света.
'Give [*imperative*] the mobile – I'll call! – suggested Sveta.'

ITA: «**Dammi** il telefonino, ti chiamo?», propose Sveta.
“Give me [*imperative*] the mobile, shall I call you?,” suggested Sveta.'

With regards to the item “*mi dai*”, the outcome of the search in the parallel Russian-Italian corpus consists of 13 occurrences, among which only two are related to requesting, one Italian SL (example 5), and one Russian SL (example 6).

- (6) Niccolò Ammaniti. *Io non ho paura (2001)* | Никколо Амманити. *Я не боюсь (Валерий Николаев, 2005)*

ITA: **Mi dai** un bicchiere d'acqua?
'will you give me [*mi X?*] a glass of water?'

RUS: **Принеси мне** попить
'give me [*imperative*] to drink'

- (7) Иван Гончаров. *Обломов (1849-1858)* | Ivan Goncarov. *Oblovov (Argia Michettoni)*

RUS: ты **дай мне** на извозчика, — и завтра же переезжать
'you give me [*imperative*] money for the coachman and tomorrow you can move'

ITA: tu **mi dai** i soldi per la carrozza e già domani puoi traslocare
'you give me [*mi X*] money for the carriage and already tomorrow you can move'

The example (6) shows how the *mi X?* request in Italian can be easily translated with a plane imperative into Russian, in line with the cross-cultural pragmatic

differences between the two languages. Conversely, the example (7) shows a proper translation of a request, where the Russian imperative is substituted by a *mi X?* interrogative, in that the request pertains a new self-contained – and thus unilateral (Rossi 2012) – plan.

The search of “*dai*” gives an outcome of 234 occurrences. As seen in the previous data, *dai* can be used in a variety of contexts, such as commands and requests, but also idioms, like *dai Бог* ‘God willing, lit. God give!’ which counts 34 occurrences, and concessive formulae, which are translated into Italian with the verb *lasciare* ‘let’ (example 8).

- (8) *Борис Пастернак. Доктор Живаго (1945-1955) | Boris Pasternak. Il dottor Zivago (Pietro Zveteremich)*

RUS: *Дай людям очухаться с дороги.*
‘give [*imperative*] people rest from the road’

ITA: *Lascia che si riposino del viaggio.*
‘Let them rest from the journey’

Without considering idioms and concessive structures, *dai* is translated with *dammi* (or similar imperative constructions) 62 out of 64 times. Alongside the already mentioned *mi X* structure in (7), the example in (9) displays a different solution, where *dai* is not translated at all.

- (9) *Николай Гоголь. Мертвые души (1835-1852) | Nikolaj Gogol.’ Anime morte (Paolo Nori)*

RUS: *я тебе дам шарманку и все, сколько ни есть у меня, мертвые души, а ты мне дай свою бричку и триста рублей придачи*
‘I’ll give you the barrel organ and all the dead souls, as much as I have, and you give [*imperative*] me your chariot and three hundred rubles more’

ITA: *ti darò l’organetto e tutte le anime morte che ho, in cambio della tua carrozzella più altri trecento rubli* ‘I’ll give you the barrel organ and all the dead souls I have, in exchange for your chariot and three hundred rubles more’

The translation in (9) shows a different kind of compensation, where the bilateral agreement between the two participants is rendered with the insertion of a lexical item, i.e. *in cambio di* ‘in exchange for,’ instead of the imperative form in the SL.

In sum, the vast presence of one-to-one correspondence between the imperatives *dai/dammi* found in the parallel corpus suggests the tendency to translate the Russian imperative *dai* with its Italian correspondent *dammi*. However, from a pragmatic perspective the two languages display a different distribution of imperative and a structural calque of imperative in requesting when translating from Russian to Italian might lead to pragmatically infelicitous utterances.

4. Conclusion

Despite the narrow size of translations considered in the corpus and the analysis limited to the prototypical requesting verb ‘give,’ the exploratory study conducted on the occurrences of *daï/dammi* and *mi dai* in the parallel Russian-Italian corpus has demonstrated that (a) imperatives in Italian SL are always properly translated with imperatives in Russian TL, (b) there is a tendency to preserve the common grammatical features in spite of pragmatic felicity when translating imperatives in requests from Russian SL to Italian TL, and (c) an extended use of the imperative in Italian TL triggers a directive and commanding reading. In particular, provided that informal bilateral is the only kind of request that allows the use of imperative in Italian, translations of requests from Russian SL to Italian TL should avoid imperatives and introduce more indirect structures, such as negative-interrogatives and *mi X?*.

The study has shown how a good knowledge of cross-cultural pragmatics can positively affect the quality of translation, and how pragmatics can play a crucial role when looking for translation equivalence (House 1997). As a matter of fact, research on cross-cultural pragmatics allows the identification of language-specific structures used to convey a certain kind of *politeness* and to avoid face-loss. Knowing the different linguistic strategies in both SL and TL can determine equivalent structures in the two languages and thus provide a solid basis for translation practice.

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