Corpus analysis of linguistic signs: Methodological insights from the field of translation studies

Dr. Henry Jones

Lecturer
University of Manchester, UK

Abstract

Over the past fifty years, translation studies has blossomed into a dynamic and highly international field of academic study examining a wide diversity of translation-related phenomena. Much research in this area has sought to highlight both the complexity and significance of translation as a social, cultural, political and ethical phenomenon. It has thus helped to challenge pervasive but reductive views of translation involving the straightforward transfer of meaning and the search for equivalence between semiotic systems. It has also helped garner greater recognition of the agency of (professionals and non-professional) translators as social actors occupying positions of decisive influence in their own societies as well as on a global scale.

As an intensely interdisciplinary field of research, translation studies has adopted a wide diversity of methods in pursuit of its aims. This presentation aims to showcase one method which has proved particularly productive in much of my own translation studies research: namely, corpus analysis. Corpus analysis typically involves the investigation of large electronic collections of texts, using dedicated concordancing software to identify recurring patterns in language use which might otherwise be invisible through traditional linear reading practices. Originating in the field of linguistics, corpus-based methodologies have proven enormously popular in translation studies, having been applied to serve a wide variety of research agendas[2] (Kruger et al. 2013). My own engagement with this methodology has been primarily through my involvement in the Genealogies of Knowledge project (2016-2020, https://genealogiesofknowledge.net/) which explored the role of translation in the evolution and contestation of key political and scientific concepts as they have travelled across time and space[1][3][4][5][6] (Jones 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b; Buts and Jones 2021). After introducing the project as a whole and the corpus resources we built during this project, I will illustrate the value of the corpus-based method through a case study focused on the Genealogies of Knowledge Internet corpus, a thematically curated collection of English-language activist blogs, digital magazines and other online sources. More specifically, I will explore recurring patterns in the use and translation of the political loanword demos, borrowed from classical Greek through Latin, using the tools of corpus analysis to investigate not only who deploys this linguistic sign and how they deploy it, but also with what purpose they might do so. Some specific uses of demos can be linked to left-wing activist discourse, and even in this restricted context the corpus data reveal intriguing discrepancies in the translations offered by different authors as in-text glosses for this loanword. The corpus analysis also identifies significant differences in the meanings attributed to this word in English in comparison with how it appears to have been understood in its original Greek context. Finally, I argue that the primary rationale for this recurring lexical choice can be linked with ongoing attempts to open up a new interpretative space for radical reinterrogations and retranslations of the concept of democracy in and for the contemporary public sphere.

[1] Buts, J. and H. Jones (2021) 'From Text to Data: Mediality in corpus-based translation studies', in María Calzada Pérez and Sara Laviosa (eds) 'CTS spring-cleaning: A critical reflection', MonTI 13. https://doi.org/10.6035/MonTI.2021.13.10

[2] Kruger, A., K. Wallmach and J.Munday (2013) Corpus-Based Translation Studies: research and applications, London: Bloomsbury.

[3] Jones, H. (2020a) 'Jowett's Thucydides: A corpus-based analysis of translation as political intervention', Translation Studies 13(3): 333-351. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2020.1732230

[4] Jones, H. (2020b) 'Retranslating Thucydides as a Scientific Historian: A corpus-based analysis', Target 32(1): 59-82. https://doi.org/10.1075/target.19082.jon

[5] Jones, H. (2019a) 'Searching for Statesmanship: A corpus-based analysis of a translated political discourse', Polis: The Journal for Ancient Greek and Roman Political Thought 36(2): 216-241. https://doi.org/10.1163/20512996-12340208

[6] Jones, H. (2019b) 'Shifting Characterizations of the 'Common People' in Modern English Retranslations of Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War', in Mona Baker and Henry Jones (eds) 'Genealogies of Knowledge: Tracing the Mediation of Political and Scientific Concepts across Time and Space', special issue of PalgraveCommunications. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0348-0