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CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF LINGUISTS

The Linguist

Bridging cultures

How translating a novel rooted in the Albanian landscape became a journey of self discovery



In brief

Are interpreters equipped to produce on-the-spot legal summaries in court?

Syria retold

Conveying the nuances of conflict-related slang after the fall of Assad

The Linguist

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News & editorial

CARDIFF FACES CUTS 5

IN THE MEDIA 6
Round-up of this quarter's news stories

INSIDE PARLIAMENT 7
The language competition for MPs and peers

Features

SYRIA'S LANGUAGE OF WAR 8
How translators can approach conflict terms, from prison slang to euphemistic resistance

A LIFE WITH LANGUAGES . 11
How the church inspired one linguist to serve her community, written in Swahili and English

BEHIND BARS 12
What it's like to work in secure hospitals, high-security institutions and other UK prisons

SHIFTING THE LANDSCAPE . 14
Translating her grandfather's novel, a linguist feels the weight of her people's history

A SUMMARY TRIAL? 16
The ethics of asking interpreters to summarise immigration appeal hearings

BREAKING INTO THE BOOK CLUB 18
With the success of the Women in Translation movement, we ask who is still being excluded

RETHINKING LOCALISATION 20
Why basing localisation courses on industry needs changes what is taught and how

THE MT IN THE ROOM 22
Why public services in the UK need to start talking about machine translation

DECEPTIVE RESEARCH 24
Is academic knowledge distorted when (poor) translations are referenced as source text?

THE FALL OF URDU? 26
How India's language policies and attitudes are affecting one of its most spoken languages

Reviews

BOOKS 28
Nevermore, *Why Animals Talk* and more

Opinion & comment

SPEAK LIKE A ROBOT 30
Is AI changing the way we communicate?

THE AI TOOLBOX 33
The free tools that can boost your productivity

GROWING RESOURCES . . . 34

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Deceptive research

Mehmet Yildiz considers the academic risks of researchers using translations as if they are source text

Pseudo-retranslation refers to an academic author's appropriation of another academic author's translation without giving them proper credit, and presenting it as a translation of the source. It was in 2017 that I came across my first case. I was commissioned to translate a PhD candidate's manuscript into English, but I had difficulty understanding a reference (Drmrod), which turned out to be a typo (for Ormrod) in a reference that had been translated. An online search revealed that many other Turkish academic works incorporated this translation, including the errors.

It dawned on me that there was a pattern that I needed to investigate to describe its mechanisms and probable impacts on academia. I searched Turkish journal and thesis repositories for similar instances, only to discover that pseudo-retranslation is pervasive in Turkish academia – especially where institutional oversight is not stringent.

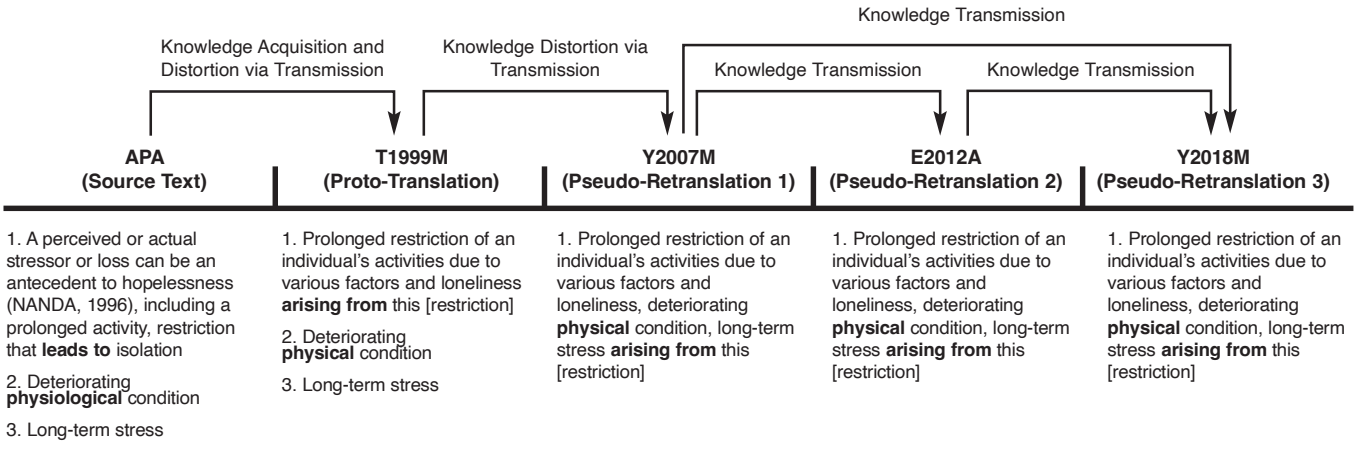
The graph below is illustrative of how this phenomenon operates. It begins with an academic source text (in this case published by the American Psychological Association in 1997; APA) which is translated (in this example for a thesis in 1999; T1999M). Through this target text, which I call the 'proto-translation', some scholarly knowledge is acquired by the target community. Then an academic author appropriates the proto-translation verbatim, partially or as modified, which constitutes our first pseudo-retranslation (Y2007M). The subsequent pseudo-retranslations (E2012A and Y2018M) can be derived from the proto-translation or the predating pseudo-retranslations.

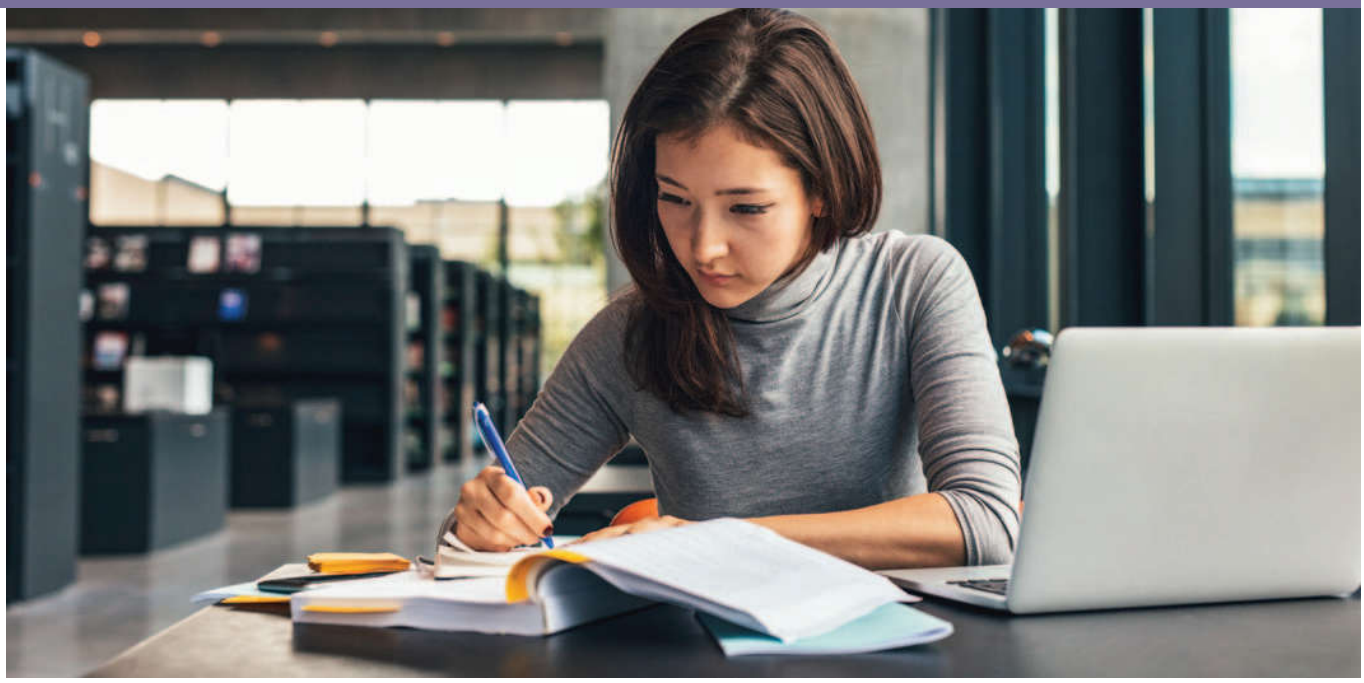
The graph draws on instances from the Turkish context,[2] but I have also observed pseudo-retranslations in other languages, including Spanish, Portuguese and German, while Michael Dougherty has identified it in English.[3] We can see how the process distorts meaning. For example, the graph shows how the word 'physiological' becomes 'physical' in the proto-translation. While the original text and proto-translation allege that "prolonged restriction of an individual's activities" leads to "loneliness", the first pseudo-retranslation proposes that it also causes "deteriorating physical condition" and "long-term stress". Interestingly, the first pseudo-retranslation is appropriated verbatim by the second, and reappears 11 years later in the third.

So what's the problem?

To understand why this is so problematic we should consider that academic knowledge is collectively and accumulatively generated – that academics avail themselves of previously produced knowledge. As the saying goes, 'we stand on the shoulders of giants', grateful for what they have achieved and bequeathed to us. However, this places some weighty responsibility on us as academic authors.

Graph showing an example of pseudo-retranslation[1]





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We are expected to be epistemically virtuous, as this is conducive to knowledge, and thus to truth.[4] Epistemic virtues include open-mindedness, inquisitiveness, courage, carefulness, perseverance, academic integrity, intellectual humility and fairness.[5] For instance, a member of academia is expected to welcome views challenging their intellectual stance, and to be inquisitive and courageous in challenging others' intellectual positions.

On the flipside, we should refrain from epistemic vices: "intellectual pride, negligence, idleness, cowardice, conformity, carelessness, rigidity, prejudice, wishful thinking, closed-mindedness, insensitivity to detail, obtuseness, and lack of thoroughness".[6] Such vices pose serious threats to existing knowledge. Culprits are "intellectually lazy", "incurious about topics about which they ought to have an interest" and "lacking in conscientiousness when dealing with evidence".[7] Pseudo-retranslators, for example, take shortcuts to avail themselves of a source text instead of taking the more arduous interlingual and intertextual path to academic writing.

They should refer to the original and translate it if they have command of the language. Alternatively, they could ask a colleague to translate it or commission a professional translation. If it is necessary to use a previous translation, its accuracy should at least be verified, either by comparing it with other translations or by asking someone who knows the languages to check it, and credit should be given to its renderer.

Epistemic laziness may lead to instances where available academic knowledge is distorted through translation – as in the proto-translation T1999M (see graph, left). Pseudo-retranslations may further mar the meaning and facilitate the propagation of flawed pieces of knowledge.

Seemingly unconcerned with accuracy, pseudo-retranslators do not refer back to the source but pretend to have translated from it with a referential mention. This results in the fallacy that the meaning was produced by the original author. In the graph, all three pseudo-retranslators purport to have referred to the American Psychological Association, but the recurring errors suggest they did not.

The lack of curiosity about the accuracy of the presented knowledge in a pre-existing translation might cause a degradation of academic knowledge. This issue may lead to a corrupted academic ecosystem, where trust in scholarship is eroded, inaccurate scholarly information is traded, lines of textual interdependency are blurred, academic codes of behaviour are discounted, academic integrity is compromised, and academic/professional aptness is undermined.

Pseudo-retranslation is difficult to identify and is hardly suspected because it is almost always accompanied by an in-text reference. To preclude pseudo-retranslations from happening, a couple of preventive and corrective measures can be taken. Education is key, because I suggest that linguistic incompetence is among the primary factors.

Academic authors should be informed of the existence of pseudo-retranslation and its detriment to scholarly knowledge. During training, researchers should learn how to observe the conventions of proper crediting and take a sceptical approach to previously generated academic knowledge. Moreover, they should be informed of the probable dangers of wanton text appropriations, such as pseudo-retranslations.

Some institutional precautions can also be adopted. Among them are scrupulous editorial oversight, where software-produced similarity rates are rigorously studied with attention to translation accuracy, authors are instantly warned of instances of pseudo-retranslation when detected, and if persistent, misappropriations are sonorously disclosed and the authors' affiliated bodies are informed.

Notes

1 Yildiz, M (2024) *Pseudo-Retranslation*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 66

2 The (pseudo-re)translations in the corpus are in Turkish but they are back-translated into English in the graph.

3 Dougherty, MV (2024) *New Techniques for Proving Plagiarism: Case studies from the Sacred Disciplines at the Pontifical Gregorian University*, Leiden and Boston: Brill

4 Pritchard, D (2024) *What Is This Thing Called Knowledge?*, London and New York: Routledge; and Fricker, M (2007) *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*, Oxford: OUP

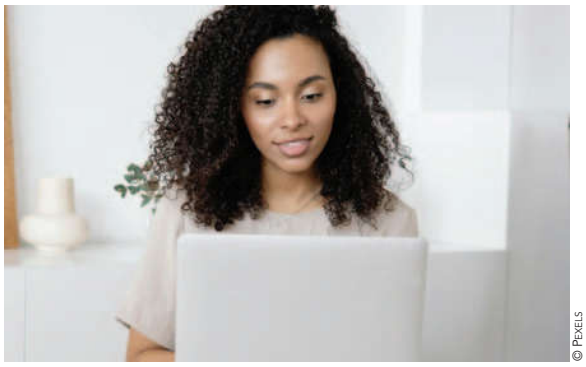
5 Watson, L (2020) 'Educating for Good Questioning as a Democratic Skill'. In Fricker, M et al, *The Routledge Handbook of Social Epistemology*, New York and London: Routledge, 437-446; Zagzebski, L and DePaul, M (2003) 'Introduction'. In DePaul, M and Zagzebski, L, *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from ethics and epistemology*, Oxford: OUP, 1-12

6 Zagzebski, L (1996) *Virtues of the Mind: An inquiry into the nature of virtue and the ethical foundations of knowledge*, Cambridge: CUP, 15

7 *Op. cit.* Pritchard, 162-173

Growing resources

How CIOL is expanding its online resources to promote inclusive communication and support professional standards



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In an ever-evolving linguistic landscape, the Chartered Institute of Linguists continues to develop our comprehensive online resource hub on the **Resources tab** of the CIOL homepage, now addressing two vital aspects of professional language practice: international standards and inclusive communication.

The ISO resources section provides essential information about International Organization for Standardization guidelines, including the new ISO 5060 (2024) for translation quality evaluation. This standard introduces seven main categories for error classification, from terminology to design and markup, supporting rigorous 'human-led' translation quality assessment. It is also worth noting that both the DipTrans and CertTrans qualifications are recognised by the Association of Translation Companies as meeting ISO 17100 requirements for professional translator competencies.

Complementing these technical standards is CIOL's growing collection of **inclusive language resources**, which acknowledge the constant evolution of language conventions and norms. The collection features authoritative guidance from leading international organisations, including the United Nations' guidelines for gender-inclusive language (available in six official languages) and the Council of the European Union's recommendations for inclusive communication. Additional resources from Oxfam and others provide practical insights into respectful cross-cultural communication. The CIOL Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee looks at inclusive language resources before they are shared.

CIOL is committed to maintaining and updating our wide range of free web resources to help language professionals have easier access to current, authoritative guidance on AI, international standards, inclusive communication and more.

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