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Review of: Svenja Kranich (2016), Contrastive Pragmatics and Translation

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► **To cite this version:**

Naomi Truan. Review of: Svenja Kranich (2016), Contrastive Pragmatics and Translation. *The LINGUIST List*, 2017. <halshs-01734562>

HAL Id: halshs-01734562

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01734562v1>

Submitted on 14 Mar 2018

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HAL Authorization

LINGUIST List 28.1458

Thu Mar 23 2017

Review: English; German; Ling & Literature; Pragmatics; Translation: Kranich (2016)

Editor for this issue: Clare Harshey <clare@linguistlist.org>

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Date: 06-Nov-2016

From: Naomi Truan <truan.naomi@gmail.com>

Subject: Contrastive Pragmatics and Translation



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AUTHOR: Svenja Kranich

TITLE: Contrastive Pragmatics and Translation

SUBTITLE: Evaluation, epistemic modality and communicative styles in English and German

SERIES TITLE: Pragmatics & Beyond New Series 261

PUBLISHER: John Benjamins

YEAR: 2016

REVIEWER: Naomi Truan, Université Paris Sorbonne - Paris IV

Reviews Editor: Helen Aristar-Dry

SUMMARY

In "Contrastive Pragmatics and Translation. Evaluation, epistemic modality and communicative styles in English and German", Svenja Kranich investigates "which pragmatic contrasts exist between English and German and "how they are handled in English-German translations" (p. 4). Her analysis, which has been conducted within the project 'Covert Translation' (1999-2011, Research Center on Multilingualism in Hamburg) draws on empirical, corpus-based research.

The book is divided into nine chapters of unequal length. Chapters 1 to 5 deal with methodological and theoretical issues, whereas Chapters 6 to 9 present the main findings.

Chapter 1, entitled "Introduction", presents the main concepts used in the book, i.e. "contrastive pragmatics" (p. 4), "covert and overt translation" (p. 5) and related terms such as "tertium comparationis" (p. 6) and "equivalence" (p. 7), "universals" (p. 8) and finally "subjectivity" (p. 8). These concepts already outline the communicative dimension of the study: how is addressee-orientation, understood as "the degree of interactionality of a text" (p. 11), expressed and translated in English and German texts? In a brief review of the state of the art, Kranich shows that contrastive studies between English and German long remained typological and structural rather than based on communicative styles, which always are in jeopardy of producing "scientifically manufactured stereotypes" (Ehlich 2000:69, cited p. 13).

In Chapter 2, "General hypotheses, data and methods", the subcorpora used for the contrastive analysis are presented. The first is a corpus of popular scientific articles (the "Popular Science Corpus" or "POP") with approximately 500,000 words, and English originals, German originals and English-German translations only, whereas the second is a smaller corpus of corporate business texts (approximately 90,000 words), including letters to shareholders (which constitutes, together with additional texts, a corpus referred to as "LeSh") and mission statements (the "Mixed Business Corpus" or "MixB"), a bidirectional corpus with English texts and their German translations and the other way around (apart from the "LeSh").

"The five dimensions of English-German communicative contrasts" are the topic of Chapter 3, which can be described in terms of "tendenc[ies]" (p. 23). To sum up, whereas English shows a tendency towards indirectness, person orientation, addressee orientation, implicitness and verbal routines, German shows a tendency towards directness, content orientation, self-orientation, explicitness, and ad-hoc-formulations, so that English and German can be represented as two extremities.

Chapter 4, "Contrastive perspectives on English-German pragmatic and stylistic contrasts", provides "an overview of the state of the art, with the focus on the genres of the corpora (popular science and business communication) according to the following parameters: text organisation, hedging and impersonal expressions, deictic elements, connectivity, modality. The summary of previous results is presented in a large table (p. 47-49).

As the author states, Chapter 5, "The impact of English-German pragmatic and stylistic contrasts on translation", "follows a parallel organization as the previous one" (p. 51) with a comparison of the same parameters in popular science, business communication, and other genres, and a summary in a table form (p. 64-65).

After these six introductory chapters – which represent 66 pages, that is about one third of the book –, Kranich turns to her corpus-based investigations concerning evaluative adjectives (Chapter 6) and epistemic modal marking (Chapter 7).

Chapter 6, "English-German contrasts in evaluative practice", focuses on evaluation as a result from a subjective process with regard to conventions in the two linguacultures. Whereas evaluation is rather marginal in popular scientific writing, it comes to the foreground in letters to shareholders, which have "the double function of presenting information and building trust in the company" (p. 69).

The classification of evaluative expressions seems to be the main issue: "the appraisal framework does not offer an adequate means of classification" (p. 73), manual extraction neither ("But what does one extract?", p. 73). After discussing the literature on evaluation, the author finally concentrates on positively evaluative adjectives (for the simple reason that negative adjectives almost do not appear in this corpus "due to the special make-up of the genre" and "its marketing-like function", p. 75).

The results show that characterising adjectives in the genre 'letters to shareholders' are dominantly (90.4% in German originals and 95.0% in English originals) used in attributive position. On a semantic level, Dixon's classification (1982), which "distinguishes between seven semantic concepts that are typically expressed by adjectives in languages that have an open adjective class" (p. 77), is ruled out for the present study. The concept of gradation (scalar adjectives, Paradis 1997) appears more fruitful to the author.

The quantitative results significantly "confirm the trends apparent from previous studies of English-German communicative contrasts" (p. 84, see also Chapter 3): "one finds more emphatic positive evaluation in the English texts as opposed to the German texts" (p. 85), "English makes use of much more repetition in the domain of positive

evaluative adjectives, whereas German is characterized by more lexical variation” (p. 91). Concerning the translations, “German translations show considerable shining through of the English source text norms” (p. 88).

In Chapter 7 devoted to “English-German contrasts in epistemic modal marking”, hedging (defined as “all linguistic strategies linguistic markers that allow the speaker to weaken the force of an utterance (cf. e.g. Talbot 2010:37)”, p. 95) is at stake, in relation with content-orientation (typical for German) and reader-orientation (typical for English). The chapter is divided according to the corpora, i.e. letters to shareholders and popular science, concluding with a cross-genre comparison of epistemic modality in two genres, which shows clear differences between genres and languages.

The main results can be summarised as such: letters to shareholders, which have to “inspire trust” (p. 154), use fewer epistemic modal markers than popular science texts, where “speculation [...] seems more permissible” (p. 154). To sum up, “genre causes stronger frequency differences than does different linguaculture” (p. 154).

In Chapter 8, Kranich wonders if translations can be regarded “as trigger of linguistic change” (p. 165). She first presents diachronic changes in both corpora, and then focuses on four case studies which show an evolution: the personal pronouns *we/wir*, the connectors *and/und*, the connectors *but/aber/doch*, and epistemic modal markers.

“Conclusion and outlook” are presented in Chapter 9. The five dimensions of contrastive preferences (indirectness/directness; person-orientation/content-orientation; addressee-orientation/self-orientation; implicitness/explicitness; verbal routines/ad-hoc-formulations) remain valid for Kranich’s study.

EVALUATION

Despite being based on two very specialised corpora, Kranich’s findings are very conclusive. The fact that she constantly relates her results to genre issues (in popular science, business communication, or general writing), makes her approach very sensitive to variations which might not be linked with the language as such – or the linguaculture –, but with (implicit) generic rules and constraints. It would have been possible to reflect even more on the concept of “genre” in a given discourse community by considering “why and how members of specific professional or disciplinary communities communicate the way they do” (Bhatia 1993, 2004).

Moreover, the emphasis on methodological issues makes it possible for readers and learners to not only follow the steps leading to the results very easily, but also to apply the methodological reflexions to their own research. Although the author does not expressly state it, the perspective is onomasiological: it goes from a linguistic category (evaluation, modality) and looks for its markers in the given languages. Analysis constraints as well as the similarities between English and German often lead to a focus on a lexical level, though, which one could regret. Despite the understandable limitations evoked by the author (for instance on page 74), it seems extremely restrictive to focus only on positive evaluative adjectives, especially given the fact that the corpora are not so extensive, so that a fine-grained approach on more levels would be conceivable. This is a pity, especially as the author presents many evaluative markers such as semantic prosody to then fully rule them out for the analysis. The analysis of epistemic modal marking is more diverse, including modal verbs, modal adverbs and adjectives, lexical verbs and stronger lexical constructions, which also makes the results more valuable.

Finally, the book sometimes conveys the impression that the study mainly tends to confirm previous findings, as some elements of the conclusion show: “[t]he contrasts between English and German texts again confirm the existence of the dimensions of contrast” (p. 180), “[t]he contrastive results again confirm the robustness of the dimensions of contrast” (p. 182). From this point of view, it seems that the research could have benefited from a clearer presentation of its innovative potential.

Despite this limitation, the book is very readable and well structured. It provides useful insights into communicative practices in two linguacultures and professional communities and convincingly indicates where translators should concentrate when working between English and German.

FOOTNOTES:

1. As the author explains, in her study, the terms pragmatic and stylistic “are often used together” (p. 3, footnote 4).
2. “The term linguaculture (originally coined by Friedrich (1989:307)) is used in this work to highlight the connexion between language use and cultural backgrounds” (p. 15, footnote 17).

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Naomi Truan is a PhD Student in Contrastive Linguistics at the Université Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV) and the Freie Universität Berlin (“cotutelle de these”). Her research interests include Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis, Corpus Linguistics and Cognitive Linguistics. Her current work focuses on the category of person, pronouns, terms of address and reported speech in political discourse in France, Germany and Great Britain.

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