Chapter 4: Grammatical Equivalence

1. Choose a notional category such as time reference, gender, countability, visibility, modality or animacy and compare the way it is expressed in your target language with the way it is expressed in English. Comment in particular on the sort of problems that could arise in translation from differences in the way the notion in question is expressed in the two languages. You may find it helpful to refer to grammars of your source and target languages and to base your discussion on an analysis of authentic translated texts.

Gender
Greek has a grammatical distinction for gender e.g.
- in pronouns (as in English, his/her) and
- in adjectives (unlike English): adjective endings are marked for gender in Greek, so translators translating into Greek (in case they cannot tell people’s sex by their name) may need to look for information extralinguistically.

Modality
Grammatical systems differ in the way they encode modality. In Greek, the modal verb system runs parallel to a mood system (indicative, subjunctive mood, encoded in verb form) which also does part of the job. In English>Greek translation a choice has to be made with reference to which system (or combination of systems) will be employed.

Another difference which relates to the modality system, but is rather of a pragmatic type, is that quite often English tentative modal notions (expressed through modal verbs like could, would, might etc) may be rendered in Greek in terms of the corresponding standard options (can, will, may etc) or in terms of other forms conveying higher certainty. This is because Greek is a positively polite language and thus prefers to raise the level of certainty in communication. Likewise, modal adverbials like definitely, surely etc may appear on the Greek side, as a manifestation of the raising-certainty intention.

2. Imagine that you have been provisionally asked to translate John Le Carré’s The Russia House (1989) into your target language. Before you can sign the translation contract, the publishers insist that you provide a sample translation of a couple of pages to allow them to assess your competence as a translator of this type of literature. They choose the following extract and ask you to submit a target version of it, stating that they appreciate that you may not have had time to read the whole novel but that they just want to see how you might handle Le Carré’s distinctive use of language.
Oh, and note was taken. Passively, since active verbs have an unpleasant way of betraying the actor. Very serious note. Taken all over the place.

Note was taken that Ned had failed to advise the twelfth floor of Barley’s drunken breakout after his return from Leningrad.

Note was taken that Ned had requisitioned all manner of resources on that same night, for which he had never accounted, among them Ben Lugg and the services of the head listener Mary, who sufficiently overcame her loyalty to a brother officer to give the committee a lurid account of Ned’s high-handedness. Demanding illegal taps! Imagine! Faulting telephones! The liberty!

Mary was pensioned off soon after this and now lives in a rage in Malta, where it is feared she is writing her memoirs.

Note was also taken, if regretfully, of the questionable conduct of our Legal Adviser de Palfrey – I even got my de back* – who had failed to justify his use of the Home Secretary’s delegated authority in the full knowledge that this was required of him by the secretly agreed Procedures Governing the Service’s Activities as Amended by etcetera, and in accordance with paragraph something of a deniable Home Office protocol.

The heat of battle was however taken into account. The Legal Adviser was not pensioned off, neither did he take himself to Malta. But he was not exonerated either. A partial pardon at best. A Legal Adviser should not have been so close to an operation. An inappropriate use of the Legal Adviser’s skills. The word injudicious was passed around.

It was also noted with regret that the same Legal Adviser had drafted a glowing testimonial of Barley for Clive’s signature not forty-eight hours before Barley’s disappearance, thus enabling Barley to take possession of the shopping list**, though presumably not for long.

In my spare hours, I drew up Ned’s terms of severance and thought nervously about
my own. Life inside the Service might have its limitations but the thought of life outside it terrified me.

(pp. 412–13)

* Palfrey’s full name is Horatio Benedict de Palfrey, but, as he explains earlier (p. 47), ‘you may forget the first two [names] immediately, and somehow nobody has ever remembered the “de” at all’.
** A document detailing information required by Whitehall and Washington from the informant/potential defector on the Russian side.

When you have translated the above text into your target language, discuss any differences between the source and target versions in terms of grammatical meaning, paying particular attention to the use of passive structures¹ and the reflexive take himself to Malta (paragraph 6). You may also wish to use this opportunity to consolidate your knowledge of other areas covered so far: namely semantics and lexis. Consider, for instance, the evoked meaning of an expression such as all over the place (paragraph 1), or the impact of an unusual collocation such as lives in a rage (paragraph 4); how well do these expressions translate into your target language?

Comment at length on the strategies you used to overcome difficulties at the grammatical level in particular.

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3. Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow is the title of one of two English translations of an award-winning novel by the Danish author Peter Høeg, which first appeared in 1992. On the surface, the story revolves around Smilla Qaaviqaq Jaspersen, daughter of a Greenlandic Inuit mother and a rich Danish dentist, who becomes suspicious about the death of a Greenlandic child in Copenhagen and decides to investigate it. At a deeper level, the story is about Denmark’s colonial history and the relationship between different groups in Danish society today.

In the following extract (Høeg 2005:262-63), Smilla switches from reflecting on her current situation to remembering aspects of her past life.

I put on my tracksuit. I knot the steel ball into a long white bath towel that I’ve folded double. Then I hang it back on its hook. And I sit down to wait.

If you have to wait for a long time, you have to seize hold of the waiting or it will become destructive. If you let things slide, your consciousness will waver, awakening fear and restlessness, then depression strikes, and you’re pulled down.

To keep up my spirits I ask myself, What is a human being? Who am I? Am I my name?

¹ I imagine that the extensive use of the passive in this particular text will not prove problematic in languages such as Japanese and Chinese, where the passive is associated with adversity. It may well be that the adversity function will be compatible with the tone of the text and the implications of cowardice and denial of responsibility.
The year I was born my mother travelled to West Greenland and brought home the girl’s name Millaaraq. Because it reminded Moritz of the Danish word mild, which didn’t exist in the vocabulary of his love relationship with my mother, because he wanted to transform everything Greenlandic into something that would make it European and familiar, and because I apparently had smiled at him – the boundless trust of an infant, which comes from the fact that she still doesn’t know what’s in store for her – my parents agreed on Smillaaraq. With the wear and tear that time subjects all of us to, it was shortened to Smilla.

For Smilla’s reflecting on her current situation the passage uses present tenses, as in English. For remembering aspects of her past life, Smilla is made to use past tenses (non/perfective, punctual and durative aspects).

What sounded unusual for English (probably because the English version reflects cohesive links of the original) was the sequence of the causal connectives in the third paragraph: because y [z, because f], and because n, m. I somehow had difficulty tracing how causes and effects are paired. Greek CAN take embeddings and winding subordination, it’s just that it would be more appropriate if links were made more explicit. The Greek text reads as follows:

Βάζω τη φόρμα μου. Δένω την απολίνη μπάλα σε μια άστρη πετσέτα μπάνιου που την έχω διπλώσει. Μετά την ξανακρεμάω στην κρεμάστρα και κάθομαι και περιμένω.

Όταν έχεις να περιμένεις κάμποση ώρα, κάτι πρέπει να κάνεις με την αναμονή, αλλιώς θα σε αφανίσει. Αν αφήνεις την ώρα να περνάει, η ψυχή σου αμφισβατεύεται, γεννά φόβο και ανησυχία, και μετά χτυπά η κατάθλιψη, και καταπέφτεις. Για να διαπεράσεις την αισιοδοξία μου αναζητώ απαντήσεις σε διάφορα ερωτήματα: Τι είναι ο άνθρωπος; Ποια είμαι; Είμαι αυτό που οι άλλοι είδαν σε μένα;

Τη χρονιά που γεννήθηκα, η μητέρα μου είχε πάει στη Δυτική Γροιλανδία και γύρισε με το κοριτσιστικό όνομα Millaaraq. Αυτό, επειδή του Μόριτς του θύμιζε την δανέζικη λέξη ήπια – λέξη που δεν συμπεριλαμβάνονταν στο λεξιλόγιο που περιέγραφε την ερωτική του σχέση με τη μητέρα μου, γιατί ήθελε να αλλάξει οποιοδήποτε γροιλανδικό σε κάτι που να μοιάζει ευρωπαϊκό και οικείο – και προφανώς επειδή του χαμογέλασα (με εκείνη την απέραντη εμπιστοσύνη του βρέφους, που προέρχεται από το γεγονός ότι δεν υπομίναζε τα περιμένει), οι γονείς μου συμφώνησαν να μου δώσουν το όνομα Smillaaraq. Με τη φθορά που φέρνει ο χρόνος, το Smillaaraq έγινε Smilla.
Imagine that Peter Høeg and the English publisher of this novel have commissioned you and various other translators to render a number of passages, including this one, into your target language(s) in order to establish whether the English translation can serve as a source text in situations where translators from Danish (for example into languages like Ukranian or Kurdish) are unlikely to be available. When you have translated it, comment on the relevant difficulties and the strategies you used to convey the function(s) of each tense and the impact of the switch in tenses. Your comments need to be clear and accessible, because they will be passed on to the translators who will eventually be commissioned to render the full novel into a range of languages. These translators will need to be sensitized to the impact of the interplay of tenses, among other things, in the English translation – because they will use this English translation as a source text.