End of Chapter Exercises – Chapter 4

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:

Spanish differentiates between feminine and masculine grammatical gender in nouns, most personal pronouns (third person indirect object pronoun le is an exception) and in adjectives (unlike English).

The possessive adjective is an interesting case, as Spanish does not mark the third persons of this adjective according to the gender of the possessor (as English does). So HIS/HER/THEIR IS translated as SU(S) in Spanish. Translators translating from Spanish into English may need to look for information extra-linguistically.

TIME REFERENCE

A common problem for Spanish>English translators in terms of time reference is the Spanish distinction between preterite and imperfect tense. While the difference between usually one-off actions carried out in a specific past moment (preterite) and habitual or progressive actions carried out through a period of time (imperfect) is relatively easy to understand, difficulties may arise when the translator is faced with a sentence such as ‘It was such an easy prey’. Here a translation in the preterite (Fue una presa tan fácil) indicates that the prey was ‘caught’, whereas a translation in the imperfect (Era una presa tan fácil) conveys simply a value judgement about the person or object.

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. They provide you with a short summary of the context to help you assess the tone of the extract.

Note to the translator:

John Le Carré’s The Russia House is a spy thriller which revolves around the then new era of glasnost in the Soviet Union. The general feeling that one gets from reading this novel is that nothing much has changed and that the cold-war machinations are still at play and are as irrelevant and as brutal as ever. The narrator in the following extract is Palfrey, legal adviser to the British secret service or, in his own words, „Legal adviser to the illegals” (p. 47). In this passage, which is very near the end of the book, he ironically sums up the manner in which the hypocritical bureaucrats of Whitehall and Washington dealt with their own inadequacies when their major spying operation went wrong. The various people mentioned, such as Ned and Barley, had all been involved in the operation in one way or another.

Routledge
Extract for translation:

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 para-graph 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 sever-ance and thought nervously about my own. Life inside the Service might have its limitations but the thought of life outside it terrified me.
* 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 structures 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 Qaавiqaа 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 2005:262–263), 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?

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.

Me pongo el chándal. Meto la bola de acero en una toalla grande de baño que doblo dos veces y la cuelgo del gancho. Luego me siento a esperar.

Cuando te toca esperar durante un largo tiempo, lo mejor es encararse a la espera o ésta te acaba destruyendo. Si te dejas ir, tu conciencia empieza a flaquear, surgen el miedo y la ansiedad, reaparece la depresión y estás acabada.

Para mantenerme animada empiezo a preguntarme: ¿Qué es el ser humano? ¿Quién soy yo? ¿Soy yo mi nombre?
El año que nací mi madre había hecho un viaje por West Greenland y había vuelto a casa con el nombre Millaaraq, un nombre de niña. Dado que este nombre a Moritz le recordaba a la palabra danesa para 'leve', una palabra que no formaba parte del vocabulario de su amor por mi madre; dado que él siempre tenía aquella querencia por trasformar todo lo groenlandés en algo europeo y familiar; y dado que yo, por lo visto, le había sonreído –con aquella confianza sin límites de una niña que ignoraba lo que le espera- mis padres decidieron llamarme Smillaaraq. Con el paso del tiempo y el desgaste al que nos aboca, Smillaaraq se fue quedando en Smilla.

• For Smilla’s reflection on her current situation the translation uses the present simple. The same tense is used for her reflection on the nature of waiting.

• For her reflection on how her name was given to her, the passage uses the preterite (for ‘the year I was born’, ‘my parents decided’), the imperfect (‘because it reminded Moritz’, ‘because he wanted to transform everything’), the pluperfect (‘I had smiled at him’). Also a series of periphrastic verbal clusters are used (‘empiezo a preguntarme’, ‘acaba destuyendo’, ‘se fue quedando en’).

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 avail-able. 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.