

Cross-linguistic structural priming favours form-based translation: evidence from constructions and response latencies

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The research presented in this talk approaches issues in the structuring of translations at sentence level from the angle of syntactic production in general, and structural priming in particular. Structural priming, the tendency to repeat constructions from a previously processed sentence, has been observed in recent years in cross-linguistic experiments on syntactic production by a considerable number of researchers (e.g. Loebell & Bock, 2003; Meyer & Fox Tree, 2003; Hartsuiker, Pickering, & Veltkamp, 2004; Schoonbaert, Hartsuiker, & Pickering, 2006). Response latencies have been established as a secondary measure of priming in experiments by Smith & Wheeldon (2001) and Corley & Scheepers (2002).

Two experiments are reported that studied the possibility of cross-linguistic priming in the syntactic productions of bilinguals who carried out a simple translation task: German default datives (S1) and shifted datives (S2) were translated into English constructions with double object (T1) or prepositional object (T2), with free choice of target construction. Participants had no professional training as interpreters.

- (S1) Der Bub zeigt **dem Präsidenten** *das Boot*. (S-V-IO-DO)
- (S2) Der Bub zeigt *das Boot* **dem Präsidenten**. (S-V-DO-IO)
- (T1) The boy shows **the president** *the boat*. (S-V-IO-DO)
- (T2) The boy shows *the boat* **to the president**. (S-V-DO-IO)

While the constructions of both source sentences (S1,2) can be seen as semantically equivalent with those of both target sentences (T1,2), the surface structures of source and target are only matched in translation events (S1)-(T1) and (S2)-(T2). In translation events (S1)-(T2) and (S2)-(T1), the order of verbal arguments must be inverted between source and target – there is a match in semantics, but not in surface form.

In Experiment 1, sources were translated by native speakers of German, i.e. from L1 into L2. Priming was observed in terms of structure, i.e. (T1) was offered more often as a translation of (S1) than of (S2), and (T2) more often for (S2) than for (S1). Productions of structurally primed translations were also carried faster, i.e. facilitated. In Experiment 2, sources were translated by native speakers of English, i.e. from L2 into L1. Again, structural priming was observed as before; facilitated production, however, was not in evidence in this experiment.

These results indicate that structural priming exerts some influence over structural choices during translation, but asymmetrically so depending on the direction of translation. Wider implications of these findings for research on language production and on Translation and Interpreting are discussed.