

PRONOUN-DROPPING OR ZERO ANAPHORA IN TRANSLATION
FROM GERMAN INTO PORTUGUESE

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1. Subject Personal Pronouns and Subject-Dropping

1.1 When contrasting the use of subject personal pronouns in translation from Portuguese into German, Koller (1982) found out that in narrative texts there occur 60% cases of subject-dropping in Portuguese against only 15% cases of subject-dropping in German. Subject-dropping in Portuguese is a well-known practice, and the explanation for this phenomenon lays, according to most linguists like Mateus *et al.* (1992³:211) or Cunha/Cintra (1996¹²:284), in the fact that the verbal flexion in Portuguese is rich enough to enable the listener/reader to identify 1st, 2nd and 3rd persons, thus making the use of the subject pronoun redundant.

Nevertheless, a closer analysis of the phenomenon of subject-dropping in Portuguese reveals that this explanation does not account for the fact that subject-dropping also occurs in Portuguese when, for example, 1st and 3rd person singular are served by the same verbal form, as happens in the case of the Imperfect Indicative: a form like 'andava' ('walked') admits a 1st person singular subject (eu andava) and two 3rd person singular subjects, a masculine and a feminine pronoun (ele/ela andava). And yet, as Wandruszka (1969:258-259) points out, subject-dropping remains a tendency even in these cases. He argues that subject-dropping in such cases is allowed when context or co-text give us enough clues to identify who (or what) the subject is.

1.2 Koller (1982) goes a bit further in the explanation of this phenomenon. He addresses the issue by means of the theme-rheme distinction, or rather, by means of the analysis of topic continuity/discontinuity in discourse. He claims that subject-dropping is prevailing in Portuguese if there is topic continuity in the 2nd sentence of a sequence of two, while in the case of topic discontinuity the subject pronoun must necessarily be expressed in the second sentence¹; otherwise the reference in the 2nd sentence of the sequence will be ambiguous.

2. Subject Personal Pronouns and Subject-Dropping in the Translation of Anaphora

2.1 The tendencies/rules just referred to may be illustrated by means of examples selected from Heinrich Böll's novel *Haus ohne Hüter* and its translation into Portuguese by Jorge Rosa with the title *Casa Indefesa*.

In example [1],

[1] (German) *Wenn Nella Besuch mitbrachte, rief sie Albert [...].* (p. 94)

the translator, following the subject-dropping rule in topic continuity just referred to, omits the subject pronoun in the 2nd sentence (zero anaphora):

[1] (Portuguese) *Quando Nella aparecia em casa com visitas, [ø] chamava Albert [...].* (p. 99)

In the case of topic discontinuity, as in example [2],

[2] (German) *[...] wenn er [Glum] mit Tata auf dem Bett lag, erzählte sie ihm alles [...].* (p. 163)

the translator uses the subject pronoun in the 2nd sentence:

[2] (Portuguese) *[...] quando [ø] estava deitado com Tata, ela falava-lhe em tudo [...].* (p. 170)

In cases of topic discontinuity similar to example [2], the translator sometimes uses referential definite NPs rather than pronominal forms:

[3] (German) *Martin nahm Wilma wieder auf den Schoß. Sie steckte den Daumen in den Mund [...].* (p. 257)

[3] (Portuguese) *Martin tornou a pegar em Wilma ao colo. A garota meteu o polegar na boca [...].* (p. 271)

2.2 Examples [1], [2] and [3] involve references to persons. When dealing with references to objects, the subject-dropping tendency in Portuguese seems to be even stronger. In example [4],

[4] (German) [...] *manchmal waren gar keine Zigaretten im Haus, und Onkel Albert mußte [...] mit seinem Auto in die Stadt fahren um welche zu holen [...]. “Ob, sie müssen aber frisch sein, lieber Junge” [...]* (p. 7)

there is topic discontinuity. *Onkel Albert* is the topic of the 2nd and 3rd sentences and the pronoun *sie* in the 4th sentence refers to *Zigaretten*. Nevertheless, the translator follows the subject-dropping tendency and so there is zero anaphora in the 4th sentence:

[4] (Portuguese) [...] *e muitas vezes não havia mesmo cigarros em casa, e o tio Albert não tinha outro remédio senão [...] ir no carro até à cidade comprá-los [...]. “Oh, mas [ø] devem ser frescos, meu rapaz” [...]*. (pp. 7-8)

The tendency to drop the subject personal pronoun in Portuguese when referring to objects is really all prevailing. An analysis of the translation of the whole novel reveals only one case of the use of a subject personal pronoun when referring to objects. That is example [5]:

[5] (German) [...] *[Martin] brachte den Schlüssel an der Schnur so heftig zum Pendeln, daß er links am Ohr vorbei um den Kopf herum auf die rechte Wange schlug.* (p. 64)

[5] (Portuguese) [...] *[Martin] fez pender a chave com tanta violência que ela lhe passou junto à orelha esquerda.* (p. 67)

3. Non-Subject Personal Pronouns in Translation

As for non-subject personal pronouns in anaphoric uses, pronoun-dropping or zero anaphora is extremely rare. Personal pronouns functioning as direct, indirect or prepositional objects in the German source text sentences are, as a rule, translated by means of their correspondents in Portuguese. However, the analysis of the Portuguese translation of this novel shows that there is a tendency to avoid the repetition of identical forms in near co-text. This applies both to pronouns and to nominal forms.

In example [6],

[6] (German) *Nachmittags war er meistens mit ihr allein und dann war sie ruhig und weinte nie.* (p. 89)

the pronoun form *ihr* is translated into Portuguese by means of a nominal form, *a pequena*, in order to avoid the repetition of the identical form ‘ela’ in the near co-text:

[6] (Portuguese) *Da parte da tarde, era quase sempre ele quem ficava sozinho [sic] com a pequena, e então ela mostrava-se tranquila, nunca chorava.* (p. 92). [≠ (...) era quase sempre ele quem ficava com ela, e então ela mostrava-se tranquila (...)].

4. Possessives

4.1 In a contrastive analysis of the possessive pronoun system and use in both German and Portuguese, Sousa-Möckel (1997) showed that there is a tendency in Portuguese to avoid the use of possessives in a number of cases in which they are compulsory in German. These cases involve, among others, references to body parts, objects of normal use, family members and usual habits. In these cases, the possessive pronoun in Portuguese is implicit rather than explicit.

That is why in example [7],

[7] (German) *Als der Lehrjunge gegangen war, legte der Bäcker wieder seine Hand auf ihre Hand.* (p. 266)

the German possessive *seine* is not translated into Portuguese:

[7] (Portuguese) *Quando o aprendiz se foi embora, o pasteleiro tornou a pousar a [ø] mão na dela.* (p. 281)

4.2 At the same time, Sousa-Möckel also points out that the Portuguese system of possessives allows for a more precise distinction of the gender of the possessor than the German system. This is achieved by means of the so-called analytical forms like ‘dele’, ‘dela’, ‘deles’, ‘delas’. This is clear in example [7], where the analytical form *dela* is used, rather than the synthetic form ‘sua’ that does not allow for gender distinction of the possessor.

4.3 The tendency to avoid repetition of identical forms in the near co-text referred to above sometimes leads to translations where parts of the sentence, which are not essential to its interpretation, are omitted. This can be seen in example [8],

[8] (German) [...] *legte er seine Hand auf ihre Hand und sie ließ seine Hand dort liegen.* (p. 266)

where the Portuguese translation omits the segment in bold:

[8] (Portuguese) [...] *ele pôs a sua mão na dela e ela consentiu.* (p. 281)
[... que a mão dele assim ficasse]

4.4 This tendency to avoid repetition of identical forms in the near co-text can also lead to other solutions in translation rather than omitting parts of the sentence. In example [9],

[9] (German) *Sie steckte den Daumen in den Mund und legte ihren Kopf auf seine Brust.* (p. 257)

both possessives, *ihren* and *seine*, are not symmetrically translated in the target text. The translator prefers to use the dative form of the personal pronoun, *lhe*, rather than the possessive:

[9] (Portuguese) *A garota meteu o polegar na boca e encostou-lhe a cabeça ao peito.* (p. 271)

This and other solutions for translation problems seem to point to the fact that pronominal sub-systems (personal pronouns, possessives, demonstratives and so forth) function in complementarity, thus forming a cohesive pronominal system: where a particular pronoun does not seem suitable for any sort of reason, another type of pronoun steps in, allowing for an acceptable translation.

5. Unsolved Problems

5.1 In spite of the tendencies and rules explained and exemplified in this article, we are still left with some problems that can not be solved within the scope of syntax and/or semantics.

Let us leave translation problems aside for a while and concentrate on anaphor in a particular language. Sentences containing structures of the type

F because PRO

are a case in point, where F contains two antecedents of the same gender, like in example [10]:

[10] (English) *The policeman hit the suspect because he was trying to escape.*

To interpret examples like [10], that is, to solve the anaphoric use of *he* in the 2nd sentence, some linguists seem to claim that the rule of topic continuity/discontinuity does not apply here, because the 1st sentence contains a verb with a bias. Some verbs like ‘envy’, ‘blame’ or ‘hit’ would have a bias towards the direct object. So, in example [10], the subject of the 2nd sentence, *he*, would be co-referent with the direct object of the 1st sentence, *the suspect* (and not *the policeman*).

5.2 And yet, as Reboul (1994) notes, we can still find enough examples where neither the rule of topic continuity/discontinuity, nor the rule of verbs with a bias seem to apply. Examples [11] and [12] of the structure

F because PRO

[11] (English) *The policeman hit the suspect because he is a Jew.*

[12] (English) *The policeman hit the suspect because he is an Arab.*

both containing the verb ‘hit’ in the 1st sentence – a verb supposedly with a bias towards the direct object – would necessarily have different interpretations and different anaphor resolutions. If [11] and [12] were to be uttered by Palestinians, the subject of the 2nd sentence would necessarily have different interpretations and different anaphor resolutions: in [11], *he* would refer to *the policeman*, whereas in [12], *he* would refer to *the suspect*. The same examples

would have exactly the opposite interpretation and the opposite anaphor resolution if they were to be uttered by Israelis.

These examples seem then to prove that syntactic rules alone can not account for anaphor resolution in a number of cases. Pragmatics and cultural knowledge/world knowledge will necessarily have to step in to solve problems such as these.

¹ If the personal pronoun is not enough to avoid ambiguity, one would necessarily have to resort to stronger forms, such as NPs containing a noun.

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