

**PSYCHOLINGUISTICS ON THE THRESHOLD  
OF THE YEAR 2000**

**LA PSYCHOLINGUISTIQUE SUR LE SEUIL  
DE L'AN 2000**

**A PSICOLINGUÍSTICA NO LIMAR  
DO ANO 2000**

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# **‘Natural’ sentence structure in English and Portuguese and its influence on the organisation of information in the process of translation**

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## **0. INTRODUCTION**

It is obvious to anyone involved in translation that textual information structure varies quite considerably from one language to another. There are several reasons for this. Each language has certain peculiarities of syntax, such as concord, the conjugation of verbs and case systems, which affect word order and sentence structure, and, as I have argued elsewhere (Maia 1996), these linguistic factors interact with psychological and social factors, causing *people to use the possibilities of their language to organise their texts differently*.

## **1. ‘NATURAL’ SENTENCE STRUCTURE AND THEMATISATION**

Theories of thematisation, and ‘given’ and ‘new’ information, such as that proposed by M.A.K. Halliday, suggest that the order in which information is presented in texts is important to the overall meaning. By analysing parallel and comparable corpora using Halliday’s theory, it is possible to show that certain patterns are more frequent in one language than another. I have already shown elsewhere (Maia, 1996) that Portuguese and English differ considerably in the way they begin, or thematise, sentences. Whereas sentences in the English texts adhered very closely to an SP order – over 80% – this order was found in under 50% of the Portuguese sentences in texts of similar genres.

I would argue that this type of difference is not insignificant, and that, therefore, it is not too much to suggest that the differences mentioned above might affect the native speaker’s approach to dealing with information and even his/her reasoning processes<sup>1</sup>.

### **1.1 ‘Natural’ sentence structure and translation**

Although much translation theory has been written about the relative merits of being faithful to the SL or TL text, it should be remembered that most translation is actually rather literal, whether influenced by theories like Venuti’s (Venuti, 1995) or not. In fact, a lot of the arguments of those in favour of ‘foreignising’ translation, or making it reflect the ‘flavour’ of a differ-

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<sup>1</sup> If people like Michael Ullman, who recently posted a message on a list I subscribe to, are right, such differences may also be traceable to brain patterns. He and colleagues carried out a functional Resonance Magnetic Imaging (fMRI) study of regular and irregular past tense production, and found that the brain patterns showed noticeable differences. Although this sort of research goes beyond any physical resources to which I have access, I find the implications for studying the brain patterns of translators and interpreters very interesting.

[illegible]

This sentence shows a type of inversion not unusual in Portuguese, but very marked in English. The better Portuguese students produced translations in SPOp form like:

1. (Tr.a) (Very) little is known of the origins of the city.

and, whatever other errors they made, all opted for the unmarked SP order. The native English speaker, however, produced the correct but very literal:

1. (Tr.b) Of the origins of the city, practically nothing is known.

In the context of the original Portuguese text one could argue that the writer used the inversion to connect the idea of *origins* to the 'given' information of a reference to previous centuries in the paragraph above, or that the initial word *das* stylistically parallels the initial word of the previous paragraph *do*. However, the SP order of English sounds more natural than the inversion, as the impersonal passive construction absorbs some of the 'given' information – the vagueness of history – also implicit in the previous paragraph. Because of other changes necessary in English, the idea of structural parallelism becomes a bit irrelevant.

In the next example,

2. ... onde hoje se ergue a Catedral medieval)

Apl At P(se) S

only a minority – which did not include our English student – coped successfully with translations like:

2 tr .....where today the medieval cathedral stands / is located

Apl At S P

.....where the medieval cathedral stands today.

Apl S P At

They had problems with the adjunct of time *hoje* and the inverted P(se) S structure – not least because it was associated with *erguer-se* (literally – *lifts itself*), a se- reflexive or ergative verb, which has to be substituted in English by a verb of 'stance', like *stand*, or a passive like *was built*.

The next text to be examined is from information on a trade fair, in which the style in Portuguese is typically rather dense, with a 50 word sentence. Nearly all the students found it necessary to break the sentence in half, the only exceptions being our English student, who produced an unwieldy and incorrect result, and a couple of really weak students whose 'translations' made little sense.

3. Sendo um certame em que coabitam dois importantes sectores – os materiais de construção e as máquinas e ferramentas, ligeiras e pesadas,

A(reason)

a CONSTRUNOR tem vindo ao longo dos anos a conquistar um elevado grau de notoriedade, S P- Atime -P Od

como atesta a crescente preferência dos visitantes profissionais que a visitam.

Disj

The sentence starts with an -ndo clause, a structure which is quite frequent in Portuguese – and rarely translatable by an -ing clause in English. This clause includes a P S inversion which is perfectly normal in Portuguese, and very useful, particularly as the S part consists of a shorter part + a long phrase in apposition. The main part of the clause inserts a time adjunct *ao longo dos anos* (over the years) between what I have chosen to classify here as a type of auxiliary and the lexical verb. The Disjunct at the end of the sentence includes a P S inversion and an Od P inversion.

Needless to say, the sentence proved a problem for everyone – for some a disaster. The nearest to a correct translation was:

3 Tr This event is about two important sectors: The Building Materials sector and the Light and Heavy Machinery and Tools sector. Because of this, CONSTRUNOR has been growing in importance and reputation over the years as (\*it) is shown by the increasing number of professional visitors.

I could continue endlessly with further examples, but space is not available. The main point that I wish to make is that, for both human and machine translation, it is not the lexicon but the information structure to be found in word order that is probably the biggest problem in producing good translation.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of differences of word order cannot simply be brushed aside as mere alternative structures. Halliday's reasons for emphasising the semantic, psychological and socio-cultural reasons for structuring sentences differently to give different nuances of meaning are very important in translation, where these nuances can make a lot of difference.

I have been encouraged by the positive results I am having with teaching sentence structure explicitly rather than intuitively. No longer do my better students defend their translations with the vague 'It sounds more English/Portuguese': they now consciously analyse their choices in the light of the ideas we have discussed in class.

Unfortunately, however, there are students who seem to have a serious mental block over the need to restructure syntax in translation. I do not believe this block to be merely the result of the student's stupidity or bad teaching, but more to do with the 'wiring' of the brain. I therefore need to discover some testing technique – be it psychological or neurological – to either help me to help them or, perhaps preferably, diagnose this 'structure blindness' before the student even considers work as a translator.

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