Language contact through translation as priming in historical data

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This paper discusses the hypothesis that language contact through translation (LCTT) found in historical data can be interpreted as structural priming. We will provide empirical evidence from Middle English (ME) texts translated from Old French (OF) and present a method to investigate source text influence using a parallel corpus.

An emerging domain of research on the links between language contact, language change and processing is the study of language contact through translation (LCTT). Following van Coetsem (2000:93) we assume that LCTT (neutralisation in van Coetsem's terms) occurs within the bilingual translator, whose language is eventually influenced by properties of the source language. While translating a text from the source language to the target language the bilingual translator activates his/her knowledge of both languages involved (see also Kranich 2014). Cross-linguistic interference in translation (cf. Toury, 1995), sometimes also called shining-through (Teich, 2003), is often the result of this process.

In psycholinguistics the tendency of speakers/writers to repeat structures previously encountered and the concomitant higher likelihood of occurrence of these structures is called priming and has received a lot of attention. It has been examined in speech production (e.g. Bock 1986), writing (Pickering & Branigan, 1998), in cross-linguistic experimental studies (e.g. Loebell & Bock, 2003) but also in corpus-based studies (Gries 2005, Szmrecsanyi, 2006). We hypothesise that contact effects of translation can be interpreted as structural priming.

Some papers have examined this phenomenon in historical data. For example, Taylor (2008) investigated statistical translation effects in non-biblical and biblical translations from Latin into OE and proposed the distinction between direct and indirect translation effects (for similar studies see Cichosz, Gaszewski & Pęzik 2016, Timofeeva 2010, Haeberli 2018). In the direct case the translator matches the target text structure to a source language structure in the source text and the result is a higher than usual frequency of source language-like target structures in translated texts. Indirect translation effects also become visible in the form of a higher frequency of the source language structure in translated texts overall, but in this case, the translator uses the structure that is more dominant in the source language even when recasting the source text or adding new elements. Taylor establishes a connection between these indirect effects and effects of structural priming encountered in written corpora (e.g. Gries 2005). Trips & Stein (2019) found the indirect translation effect in the form of a disproportional increase of RECIPIENT-PPs with the native verb *give* in ME translated texts (*give* + *to*-PP) on the model of Old French (*donner* + *à*-PP), see example (1).

(1)   þet is þe blisse of paradis. þe god ssel **yeve [PP to ham]** þet hit habbeþ ofguo be guode beleaue
        c'est la gloire de paradis que Diex **donra a ceus** qui la desserviront par foi et par bones euvres.
        (Somme, ch. 20, 62; Ayenbite 14, 186)

To systematically investigate priming and LCTT in historical translated texts it is necessary to establish a sound base of comparison. The contact situation between ME and OF presents the perfect scenario to do so as a number of source and target texts are available. According to Kranich (2014) medieval translators tended to produce a higher proportion of literal translations. This suggests that we will most likely find substantial shining-through effects, also because of the low degree of standardization of ME and the high prestige of OF. One pair of texts that is well suited is, as we will show, the OF religious treatise called

Somme le Roi written in 1279 (Laurent, 2008) and its ME translation *Ayenbite of Inwyt* (Morris & Gradon, 1866). We will investigate RECIPIENT-PPs with verbs of giving and, following Taylor (2008) use a target text-based method. Crucially, we will add a source text-based examination to identify all potential primes in the source text that may lead to indirect translation effects.

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