

# **Crossing the boundary between Translation Studies and Contrastive Linguistics**

**English and German noun phrases as potential  
translation difficulties**

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# Objective of Contrastive Linguistics

- raising awareness of contrasts and similarities between different languages, carrying clear implications for translator training




# Research gap

- subtle structural differences between German and English noun phrases which may result in translation difficulties or unusual frequencies of specific patterns in translations

# The English and the German noun phrase - by and large identical?

- König and Gast's textbook on English-German contrasts (2012: 208f.) gives a brief overview on the English and German noun phrase; concludes that the order of constituents within the German and the English noun phrase are "by and large identical"

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- the phrasal architecture of the noun phrase in German has indeed many similarities to its English counterpart, but there are some differences that are worth pointing out that are relevant for translators

# Translating English and German noun phrases

- corpus examples from a bilingual corpus (GECCo)\*
- importance of corpus-based methodologies for translation studies and contrastive linguistics (-> authentic examples embedded in their respective textual contexts belonging to a certain register / text type)

\* <http://www.gecco.uni-saarland.de/GECCo/index.html>

# Some differences between English and German NPs

## Multiple determiners

- German can have combinations of demonstrative articles and possessives ‘*Unser Bauplatz ist dicht bei dem eurigen.*‘
- in the German corpus part, we sometimes find multiple determiners in front of a noun (slightly formal, in emphatic and poetic language as in ‘diese meine *Absicht*’ (GO\_POPSCI\_004))
- → possessives tend to function more like adjectives and less like determiners in German

# Some differences between English and German NPs

- in some cases (archaic / poetic use or in phrases borrowed from Romance language), English allows post-nominal non-modified adjectives (e.g. *'faith in things unseen', 'heir apparent'*) where translators usually have to change the structure of the NP in German
- corpus example: *'Look for the Shetland ponies in the field adjacent!'* (EO\_TOU\_002)



# Some differences between English and German NPs

- in general, English tends to use post-modifiers and complements such as prepositional phrases or clauses that come after the head noun that often correspond to a premodifying structure in German (Doherty, 2006)
- nevertheless English does permit some types of complex noun premodifiers that are unusual in German, e.g. compounds: '*a once-in-a-generation opportunity*' (EO\_ESSAY\_029)

# Some differences between English and German NPs

- the German translation will sometimes keep the English NP structure, but it there is no general rule as to whether this is always the best translation equivalent:

- *heather covered heights /*

*heidebestandene Höhen* (EO/GTRANS\_TOU\_006)

- *the soil-dwelling worm /*

*der im Boden lebende Fadenwurm*

(EO/GTRANS\_POPSCI\_003)

# Some differences between English and German NPs

- ongoing language change: the structure of English NPs influencing German?



# Some differences between English and German NPs

- the order of adjectives in NPs can sometimes differ between originals and translations due to semantic or stylistic preference:

*dein **kleines hässliches** japanisches Auto /*

*your **ugly little** Japanese car*

(GO/ETRANS\_FICTION\_005)



# Conclusion

- some differences with regard to nominal groups in English and German result in potential translation difficulties our unusual frequencies of certain patterns in the translation
- translators should keep in mind that they sometimes may achieve a more natural sounding translation by changing the order of NP elements or embedding the semantic information from NPs into different surface structures



# References

Corpus resources: <http://www.gecco.uni-saarland.de/GECCo/>, (publically available under <https://fedora.clarin-d.uni-saarland.de/cqpweb/>)

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