PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION IN TESTS OF LANGUAGE DELAY

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Introduction

In the field of speech therapy and education and clinical psychology a substantial number of tests are used for assessing language performance. Most tests are designed for children with various kinds of language or speech impairment, but some of the tests can also be used with adults, for example those suffering dysphasia after a stroke.

The tests give us both qualitative and quantitative information. Quantitative information tells us how the child is performing relative to other children of the same age. Qualitative information indicates specifically what kind of problem the child has and in which direction his difficulties lie; for example a test of articulation may reveal difficulties with particular categories of sounds or particular types of sound sequence.

Clinical tests are sub-classified according to which of the many aspects of language they seek to examine. One basic division is between tests of production (or expression) vs. tests of reception (or comprehension). Another is between tests at various levels of language: phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic (or lexical), and pragmatic. Thirdly, tests can be classified by the modality of language, the main division being between the spoken and written modes.

Advantages of test translation

Translation of a test from the language for which it was originally designed (L₁) into the target language (L₂) has a number of potential advantages:
1. The work done on the test in L₁, including choice of items, preparation of materials, preliminary testing etc. can be transferred for use in L₂.
2. The standardisation of the test in L₁ forms a useful basis for either standardisation or simple comparison of results in L₂ (obviously, careful interpretation will be needed).
3. Bilingual speakers can be tested in the L₂, as well as, or as an alternative to, the L₁.
4. The performance of bilinguals in the test can be compared with that of monolinguals, as well as with other bilinguals.

Problems of translation/
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The problems arising from an attempt to translate a test can be classified as general vs. specific. The most outstanding general problem is the restriction on the range and types of test which are suitable for translation. Structural differences between $L_1$ and $L_2$ will restrict many kinds of test to use in the original language only. For example, tests of articulation are designed around the specific inventory of sounds and sound sequences in $L_1$ and it is quite unlikely that these will correspond to the phonological patterns typical of $L_2$ — indeed, a test of articulation must be based on the phonology of the language concerned. The same restrictions apply to morphology and syntax; it is only where tests are conceptually based that we have any hope of making a translation, since we can assume (pace Whorf) that the ideas or concepts expressed by one language will normally be translateable into another, apart from certain specific problems which can arise. Again, open-ended assessment procedures, such as L.A.R.S.P. (Crystal et al, 1976) which rely on knowledge of stages of syntactic (and semantic) development in children, will not be as amenable to translation as a more tightly-structured test, since stages of development will tend to be language-specific. The most suitable tests for translation, then, will be those containing a list of lexical items and sentence types, and whose aim is conceptual rather than narrowly phonological or syntactic. Given these problems one may be pessimistic about the possibility of finding any tests suitable for translation, but the advantages, especially for bilingual children, make it worthwhile to try. With a certain amount of adaptation, some of the currently popular clinical tests can, as we shall see, be translated, even if their basis is grammatical. The specific problems of translation will be outlined later.

Two tests

Two clinical tests have been chosen to illustrate the possibilities of translation from English into Greek. They are:

1) Test of Reception of Grammar (T.R.O.G.) (Bishop, 1982).
2) Test of the Auditory Comprehension of Language-Revised (TACL-R) (Carrow, 1985).

Both tests have similar aims and methods: they aim to test a variety of grammatical structures, which are orally presented to the subjects, who are required in response to point to one picture from an array — no expressive language is needed. Both tests include individual lexical items, which are presented before the grammatical contrasts, and both have been standardised on substantial populations of normal children; age ranges from 3 to 12 years. T.R.O.G. has a lexical section of/
48 items including all the content words appearing in the grammatical section, which consists of 80 sentences arranged in 20 blocks of four. TACL-R has three sections, the first mainly lexical (or simple grammatical structures), the second morphological, and the third ("elaborated sentences") syntactic; each section contains 40 items, progressively increasing in difficulty.

A Greek version of both these tests was prepared, with the assistance of a native speaker of Greek currently studying for a Ph.D at Edinburgh University. (I am indebted to Katerina Logothetis, a graduate of the University of Thessaloniki, for her assistance).

In the discussion below, numbers refer to items in the tests, or, for TACL-R, section and number. We can now outline the specific problems arising from attempts to translate the tests.

Specific Problems of Translation

1. There may be no direct equivalent in L₂ for the L₁ item.

Examples from the tests mainly concern the particular structures being tested, e.g. TACL 2.2 'the cap is on the toothpaste' (vs. off): the Greek translation equivalent is 'the toothpaste is capped' (vs. uncapped); TACL 2.3 'the farmer is big' (vs. the farm): the Greek for farmer is not derived by adding an agentive suffix to farm; rather, two completely unrelated lexical items are used. Other problems of equivalence usually involve cultural factors, such as grandfather clock (see (6) below).

2. The semantic 'value' of the translated items may be different.

Examples. (not from the tests) include Greek maksilari which translates as either cushion or pillow depending on function, and English teacher which translates as either dhaskalos (fem. dhaskala) or kathijitis based on the distinction between primary vs. secondary/higher education. Examples from the tests include Greek meghalos (English big, old), Greek psilos (English high, tall), and English girl (Greek koritsi, kopella). The problem here is firstly to find the right term (by reference to what is given in the pictures, if necessary) and secondly to check that the/
the differences in semantic value are not likely to make the item more, or less, difficult in L₂ than in L₁.

3. The frequency of usage of L₂/L₁ items may be different

a) Where vocabulary items are concerned, this may derive from differences of semantic value. For example, Greek andras will be higher in frequency than English husband since it also means man. TACL 1.38 has 'ascending' (stairs); this is much 'harder' to comprehend than 'going up' but Greek has only aneveni, likely to be a more familiar word than English ascending.

b) For grammatical structures, differences are likely to be more serious, and problems will undoubtedly present themselves in tests based on grammatical forms. English for example uses the present participle -ing form much more frequently than Greek, even though Greek has a literal equivalent (-ondas); similarly, English uses the present perfect (have - en) more frequently, and the simple past less frequently, than Greek, and passive constructions with agent ('the cow was chased by the dog') are more frequent, and more acceptable, in English than their literal translations would be in Greek. Both tests present verbs in the non-finite -ing form as virtually the 'base' form of the verb, e.g. T.R.O.G. dropping, drinking; TACL jumping, cutting: indeed, there is some psycholinguistic and clinical evidence to suggest that native speakers of English feel this form to be as 'basic', if not more so, than the notional base form drop, drink etc. In Greek, the equivalent in terms of frequency or expectation must be the finite (third person singular) form, pefti, pini, pidhai etc, not pe ftondas, pinondas etc. The question then arises of whether a finite form is easier to comprehend than a non-finite form.

Both tests include sections in which the English passive is specifically examined, e.g. T.R.O.G. 47 'the horse is chased by the man' (distractor' picture shows 'the horse chases the man'); TACL 'the boy is chased by the dog'. There is no doubt that decontextualized passives like these sound 'forced' and unnatural in English, but the Greek equivalents are even less acceptable and are probably best avoided altogether.
4. If pictorial material is used, the cue word or phrase in $L_2$ must, as in $L_1$, uniquely identify the target picture.

Literal translations may blur a distinction between two pictures, particularly if a lexical item has different semantic values. For example, if TACL 1.17 'riding a little bicycle' is translated literally, the phrase corresponds both to the picture of the boy riding, and to the (distractor) picture of the boy standing alongside ('holding') the bicycle, since Greek *odhiji* means both 'riding' and 'leading'. On the other hand, an idiomatic or natural translation may also blur a distinction: T.R.O.G. has 'he is sitting in the tree' (vs. *she*); the 'natural' translation 'kathete sto dhendro' does not specify sex and one has to add *afotos* (kathete etc.). The effect is to draw attention much more sharply, in Greek, to the sex of the subject than unstressed he does in English, so that the test items are no longer quite equivalent. There are a number of similar examples in TACL.

5. If pictures are used, differences should be equivalently signalled.

This problem arises several times in the tests. TACL 2.9 for example has 'the fish are eating', in which the plural is signalled only by unstressed are (distractor picture shows one fish eating). In Greek the plural has to be signalled three times (*'ta psaria trone*) (vs. *'to psari troi*) because of agreement between article and noun and between subject and verb. Similar examples include (TACL 2.32, 36, 37) 'the fish swim away', 'the deer eats apples' and 'the deer is drinking'; the English items fish and deer have been deliberately chosen because they are ambiguous (singular vs. plural) and the number distinction is thus signalled only by the verb form.

Similarly, English can delete a relative pronoun and a following auxiliary, producing constructions which are syntactically very opaque, such as 'the boy chasing the horse is fat', 'the pencil on the shoe is blue' and, even more dense, 'the cat the cow chases is black', 'the book the pencil is on is red', in which two noun phrases are directly juxtaposed. Greek has/
to make the syntactic relationship much more specific: 'the boy who is chasing ...', and 'the cat (fem) who her (accus.) chases the cow (nom.) is black'; in the latter example, the syntactic roles of cow and cat are marked by nominative and accusative forms, and the pronominal ('her') must be included, as must the relative pronoun ('who'). Greek can omit a relative pronoun only in a post-modifying noun phrase, such as 'the pencil on the shoe is blue'; in all other cases, the syntactic roles are specified much more clearly in Greek than in English. For a further example, compare English 'the book the pencil is on is red' with Greek, literally 'the book which has on it the pencil is red!

Another area in which differences arise concerns definite, indefinite and zero articles. Where English uses an indefinite article, the Greek equivalent would be redundant and zero article is much more natural: TACL 1.7 English 'a bird and a cat', Greek 'bird and cat'. Conceptually (i.e. from the child's point of view) these are probably equivalent, but there are several test items where English (obligatorily) has zero article but Greek prefers addition of the definite article: TACL 1.9, 29, 33 'little', 'most', 'second' is rendered as 'to mikro 'to dhefero', literally 'the small (one)', 'the second (one)' etc. The added specificity here is likely to make comprehension easier than in the original.

6. Cultural differences may mean that items common in L₁ are rare or puzzling in L₂.

At the worst, a test item might trigger off an emotional reaction among L₂ speakers which is entirely absent in L₁; cows in India, pigs for Moslems and Jews. Other than this, the problems are ones of familiarity. T.R.O.G. is relatively free of culture problems, so far as English-Greek is concerned, but TACL, an American test, raises British-American as well as English-Greek differences. TACL 1.37, 'left', shows vehicles turning in different directions (left, right, straight ahead) but interpretation depends on which side of the road you drive on; popcorn is familiar to American children but much less so in Britain; in Greek gharidhakia is familiar and fits the depicted material quite nicely, though it isn't popcorn. A number of items show writing in Roman alphabetic characters, which would be distracting for Greek readers./
There are also several references to baseball and associated hardware (caps, gloves, even a collection of cards). In TACL 3.9, 'the man is drinking milk' from a paper carton - in Greece, orange juice may come in paper cartons, but milk does not!

Conclusion

From a practical point of view, both tests translate reasonably well into Greek, and the pictorial material is suitable if a few modifications are made. The tests are based on English grammatical structures and may thus appear at first sight quite unsuitable for translation, since the structures of Greek clearly do not correspond. This is true at a detailed level, but at a broader level there is correspondence because the meanings which are encoded present, to the subjects, roughly the same level of difficulty in both languages; thus, the lexical items individually have approximately the same degree of frequency and familiarity in both languages, and grammatical patterns such as TROG's 'two-element combinations', 'three-element combinations', 'negative', 'singular-plural', 'postmodified subject' are sufficiently general that they can apply, and hence be tested, in both languages. For this reason, against all predictions, the translations work quite well. The only real problems occur in the testing of tense distinctions and active-passive; tense however is not tested at all in TROG, and in TACL only two items (out of 120) are affected by the English-Greek differential usage of the present-perfect (vs. simple past) tense. The active-passive distinction is, in the form presented in the tests, unnatural even in English, and is probably best omitted from a Greek version. The conclusion is that certain types of test can, with profit, be translated, but it is important to be aware of the specific problems involved if the translation is to be successful.

References:

Bishop, D.V.M. (1982), Test for Reception of Grammar, University of Manchester.