Rendering Irish autonomous verbs into English: translational challenges

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Irish has a special verb form known as *autonomous* (Stenson 2008; Nolan 2012), used in subjectless sentences like (1).

(1) *Oltar fion in Éirinn*
Drink.AUT wine in Ireland
"Wine is drunk in Ireland"

The translation of autonomous verbs has always posed non-negligible challenges to the English translator, mainly due to two orders of factors. Firstly, English lack autonomous forms of the Irish type; secondly, Irish autonomous verbs (and analogous verbal inflections in the other Celtic languages) have not yet received a systematic characterization in linguistic theory (Ó Siadhail 1989; Blevins 2003; Graver 2011).

In most written texts, passives without explicit agents are the most common English rendering of Irish autonomous verbs, since the two structures share the property of presenting an event without overtly saying who its "initiator" is. However, as also contended in many grammars of Irish (Greene 1966; a.o.), passive and autonomous entail two completely different semantic representations of an event. Notably, while passive sentences are intransitive and originate from the promotion of the object to subject function, autonomous sentences are active and basically remain subjectless, in that no superficial subject is allowed. Moreover, autonomous inflections may be found with both transitive and intransitive verbs.

Thus, the choice of passive as a rendering option for Irish autonomous verbs may turn out to be problematic, let alone misleading in terms of transparency maintenance in the translation process. Another aspect contributing to such criticality inheres in the level of information structure and, precisely, in the particular distribution of more or less relevant contents in English passives and Irish autonomous sentences. As a matter of fact, autonomous verbs are generally used whenever the speaker/writer's intention is to emphasize the event and no other syntactic unit in the sentence. In this sense, these verb types seem to parallel thetic presentative clauses such as "there is dancing", or the like. Although difficult to adopt in certain translation contexts, such *there*-sentences are in fact the most functionally aligned renderings of Irish autonomous verbs, because, similarly to these latter, they allow focusing the main event and mostly lack an explicit subject.

A further option that has never been exhaustively debated is the use of nominalizing constructions such as "The drinking of wine…" or "The fact of drinking wine…", which also allow concealing the initiator and, in certain utterance types, they may also appear as focused, as in (2).

(2) What is harmful for your health is *the frequent drinking of wine*

In this talk, I will discuss the problems related to using passive constructions to translate Irish autonomous verbs. Notably, I will seek to highlight the crucial role of translation choices that do not alter the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic features of these latter, differently from what canonical passives normally do. The alternative of *there*-sentences and nominalizations will be put forward as more suitable choices to keep a more desirable and effective semantic and pragmatic equivalence between an Irish autonomous sentence and its English translation.

References

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