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A question of (in)definiteness. A look at the Swedish pronoun *man* in English translations.

Pia Norell är verksam vid engelska institutionen i Uppsala. Hon diskuterar här ett av de klassiska problemen vid översättning från svenska till engelska: det svenska pronominet *man* med sina många olika betydelser.

A look at four Swedish grammars of English, *Modern Engelsk Grammatik*, *Engelsk Universitetsgrammatik* (Svartvik-Sager), *Gleerups Engelska Grammatik* (Ljung-Ohlander) and *Hargeviks Engelska Grammatik*, shows that they all treat the correspondences to the Swedish indefinite pronoun *man* in a fairly similar way. *One* is often mentioned among the first options but at the same time it is also pointed out as being too formal and instead *you*, *we* or *they* are recommended. Instead of a pronoun, *people*, or, as *Engelsk Universitetsgrammatik* (p. 187) puts it, 'another noun which fits the context' can be used. Another common translation is a passive clause in more formal language and when a *they* may seem unmotivated. *Gleerups Engelska Grammatik* and *Hargeviks Engelska Grammatik* also mention that an English *it/there*-clause sometimes corresponds to a Swedish clause with *man*.

These recommendations work very well in cases where *man* is 'truly' indefinite, but this is not always the case. In spite of the fact that *man* is traditionally classified as an indefinite pronoun, i.e. that it 'refers to an unknown person' (Thorell 1973:96) it is often subtly tied to a referent in the (con)text. Moreover, *man* can take on various referential functions, including being non-referential; it may include or exclude the speaker and it can replace both singular and plural antecedents (SAOB M 201, Andersson 1972, Norell 1996). *Man* has an ability to turn up anywhere on the continuum of the indefinite – definite scale, i.e. it will occur with varying degrees of modification. This changing or 'chameleon' character of *man* is something that Swedish grammars of English do not take into consideration, but which becomes obvious when a text is to be translated. The purpose of this article is to show some cases of *man* in its different roles, in fiction and non-fiction texts, its varying degrees of definiteness, how these have been handled in the English translation and what possible consequences this may have for the translated text. The article will concentrate on two ways of rendering a clause with *man*, translations with nouns in non-fiction texts, and with personal pronouns in fiction texts.

The material is taken from a corpus of original Swedish texts and their

English translations. The corpus is based on both fiction and non-fiction texts (for a detailed list of the corpus texts, see Norell 1996). The corpus contains 1,032 instances of *man* and its translations, 501 instances from non-fiction texts and 531 from fiction texts.

Man in non-fiction texts

The pronoun *man* is no doubt a very 'handy' linguistic device. In non-fiction texts it is often used non-referentially, i.e. it has no real content. Sentences with *man* can often be rephrased without using the pronoun in question; it is by no means always an unavoidable pronoun. But by using *man* a passive clause is avoided, which may make the sentence easier to interpret (Wellander 1970). Also, by using *man* the sentence is given a human subject, which, however tenuous, also adds to the readability of the text. To replace *man* with a noun in the translated text is often a way to retain the indefiniteness and also to give an exact and not too wordy translation. This noun is often taken from some other constituent in the immediate context. This way, the second most common rendering of *man* in non-fiction text (the most common is, not surprisingly, a passive clause) is by a noun phrase. This may at first give the impression that the translated text has become more specific than the original text, but this is not necessarily the case. If we look at (1) below it is clear that the possible referent of *man* is really not important. The text could just as well – if we see to the information value – have been formulated *går det att avläsa, är det möjligt att avläsa, eller kan avläsas* (*it is possible to discern, can be discerned*), but using *man* gives a 'human touch' to the text. In the translation, the object in the original clause, *de stora ländernas regeringar* (*governments in major countries*) has been turned into the subject, thus making a translation of the indefinite pronoun unnecessary. Two other possible translations were given above, also a third variant may possibly be acceptable; *one can discern* (this, however, has consequences for the referentiality). These translations are also correct, but they are not as direct as (1b). This translation takes as its starting point the active part of the sentence, the actor.

- 1a. Redan i dagläget kan *man* emellertid avläsa en betydande beslutsamhet hos de stora ländernas regeringar att nedbringa inflationstakten. (Statens Offentliga Utredningar (SOU) 1975:89, p.17)
- 1b. However, *governments in major countries* are already displaying considerable determination to reduce the rate of inflation (The 1975 Medium Term Survey (MTS 1975) of The Swedish Economy, p.16)

Also in (2) *man* is a linguistic device for the fluency of the text. Again, it is the object clause of *man* that is the important part of the sentence.

- 2a. En anledning till denna förändrade syn på invandringen var bl.a. att *man*

observerat att en betydande andel av utvandrarerna hade en anställning i hemlandet före utvandringen (SOU 1975:89, p.57)

- 2b. One reason for this was *the observation* that a considerable proportion of the emigrants had been employed in their home country (MTS 1975, p. 54)

Here, the translation takes the verb of *man* and turns it into a noun. The only alternative translation would seem to be a passive, *it has been observed*. Again, translation by a noun has the advantage of being an active construction and of focusing on the topic.

The scope of *man*, as mentioned above, is often limited in various ways and it is in these cases that a constituent of the modification is picked out to serve as the corresponding subject in the English translation. The modification in the original clause may be 'more or less' limiting, and when the noun in the translation is taken from the modifying phrase, the translation will result in the corresponding degree of (in)definiteness. An example of this is shown in (3) below:

- 3b. En anledning härtill kan vara att *man* i Sverige sedan åtskilliga decennier varit inriktad på just de problem som först under senare år fått aktualitet i vissa andra länder, (SOU 1975:89, p. 17)
- 3b. One reason for this may be that *Sweden* has been concerned for many decades with problems which have become topical only recently in certain other countries, (MTS 1975, p. 17)

In (3a) the usefulness of *man* is clearly demonstrated. The adverb of place contains the real message, but *man* is smoother in the context. To do as the English translation, to have *Sverige* as the subject would also affect the participle, which would have to be inflected for neuter, *inriktat*, with an almost uncomfortable ring of impersonality to it. The adverbial indicates that we are talking about the policy of a nation, and, moreover, a policy decided on, not by every individual in that country, but by a certain group of people. Thus, *man* is here restricted in two ways; geographically and also by the activity involved. (3b) is a good translation since it perfectly keeps the vagueness of the referent. *People in Sweden* or *Swedes* would be too focus too much and too indiscriminately on the individual.

In (4), below, *man* is anaphoric in the sense that it refers back to an antecedent from the preceding sentence.

- 4a. Det andra arbetarmötet, hållet 1882, framförde i huvudsak samma fordringar som det första. Beaktansvärt är att *man* uttalade sig för kyrkans skiljande från staten, (Tingsten: Den svenska socialdemokraternas idéutveckling, p. 66)

- 4b. The second workers' convention, held in 1882, advanced in the main the same demands as the first. Of note is the fact that *the second convention* espoused separation of church and state, (Tingsten: The Swedish Social Democrats, p. 55)

By simply reiterating the subject from the preceding sentence the translation retains exactly the same information content as the original. In both the original and the translation it would have been possible to be more specific – *delegaterna* (*the delegates*), *de närvarande* (*those present*) or other similar nouns would have fitted the context. *Man*, however, does away with the necessity of specification, just as a repetition of the subject does in the translation.

Man in fiction texts

Above we have seen how, in non-fiction, the original vagueness of *man* can be successfully rendered by using the appropriate noun. Fiction texts, however, sometimes pose different problems. The Swedish pronoun may occasionally be replaced by an English noun of a general character like *people*, *man*, *woman*, as in (5) below, taken from Christer Kihlman's *Se upp salige*, parts of which have been translated as *All the Blessings of This Life* in *Modern Swedish Prose in Translation*, edited by Karl-Erik Lagerlöf.

- 5a. Runtomkring oss sjöng *man* högtidligt, innerligt jubileigt om mörkrets furste och hans onda stämplingar mot Lexå befolkning och om Guds underbara storhet, (p. 47)
- 5b. All around, *people* sang in solemn, sincerely jubilant voices about the prince of darkness and his evil machinations against the people of Lexå and about God's wondrous greatness, (p. 135)

In this example, *man* does not really constitute a problem. But it is not always as easy as this. Sometimes *man* is clearly used as an anaphoric pronoun, as in (6) from Moa Martinsson's *Kvinnor och äppelträd*, translated as *Women and Appletrees*.

- 6a. *Man* är tjugosex år och vet en del. *Man* vet att mor inte på snart tio år har legat hos far, och väl är det så *man* slipper fler munnar. Men folk pratar, pratar om mor. Nu är inte mor så omtyckt längre, hon är utskämd på något vis, utskämd för hon badar. *Man* är tjugosex år, ung och stark och vis, och *man* måste skratta. Hur kan en mor bli utskämd för hon badar? (p. 15)
- 6b. *The young farmer* is twenty-six years old and knows a few things. *He* knows that Mother hasn't lain with Father for nearly ten years, and that's good, *he* gets out of more mouths to feed. But people talk about Mother. Now she isn't so well liked anymore. She's disgraced in some way, disgraced because she bathes. *He's* young and strong and wise,

and *he* has to laugh. How can a mother be disgraced because she bathes?
(p. 8)

It is obvious that in at least four of the five cases *man* refers to 'the young farmer'. But even so the use of *man* adds something to the text, it adds an air of generality; it hints at the possibility that this situation need not be limited only to this person. Neither the noun phrase *the young farmer* (which is needed in order to use the personal pronoun in the following) nor the personal pronoun *he* convey this at all. In the translation there is a question of anaphora and nothing else. Still, it is difficult to think of a translation that keeps the original message. Quite apart from any other considerations, *one* would not be stylistically appropriate. *You* would be stylistically more appropriate, but on the other hand, even when used generically it retains too much of its 2nd person meaning and it may be asking too much to invite the reader to identify with this particular situation. Nor would a verbal construction fulfill the same function in a natural and idiomatic way. The translator is really left with very little choice. The fifth instance of *man*, however, (*väl är det så att man slipper fler munnar att mäta*), differs from the rest. (It also shows the versatility of *man*, how, within only a few sentences, it can change its reference.) In this case it need not necessarily be limited strictly to the young man since he is probably not providing food for the family single-handedly. A translation that would have kept the original vagueness would have been *there will be no more mouths to feed*, a rendering which does not specify exactly who is doing the feeding.

Conclusion

The different roles of *man* in non-fiction texts also leads to different strategies for the translator.

In non-fiction, where information content is in focus the translator is given more room to manoeuvre; as long as the information value is kept the translation will be seen as successful. The examples above also show that when translating Swedish sentences with *man* one should not get too blinded by the pronoun itself and always try to find a translation for it, since it is often best left untranslated and its function filled by some other constituent in the clause.

In fiction texts, however, the situation is different. Here, with focus being as much on language as on content, the text is more sensitive to the translator's changes. Also, the original text can sometimes, as in (6), be so specific that the translator does not really have a fair chance to come up with a corresponding translation.

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