

N + N Constructions in English and their Spanish Translations: Evidence from a Parallel Corpus

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Abstract

The English language makes ready use of nouns as modifiers of other nouns: *lemon cake*, *garden party*, etc. A wide range of meaning relationships may be associated to these constructions in English, such as content (a lemon cake is a cake that contains lemon or has lemon flavour) or place (a garden party is held in a garden). This variety in meaning leads to a number of possible grammatical resources available in Spanish to communicate these meanings. This paper analyses a number of English N+N constructions found in a real text, and the different options taken by the Spanish translator in each case. The structures were classified according to semantic criteria (Biber et al. 1999) and the Spanish equivalents were extracted for each case in order to determine the underlying semantic patterns in the Spanish translations. The aim is to establish the degree of typicality of certain constructions for particular meanings in Spanish.

1. INTRODUCTION

English speakers frequently use nouns as modifiers of other nouns, that is, with clearly adjectival functions: *stone wall*. Noun modifiers are a condensed form to present information. The simple juxtaposition of two nouns following each other in the same noun phrase (NP) without the intervention of a preposition or any other particle leaves the relationship between the two nouns implicit. In consequence, there is a wide range of meanings that may be attached to these structures, going from content, to place, time, material, etc. This variety in meaning leads to a number of different translational options available in Spanish for these constructions.

This paper presents an analysis of a number of N + N constructions found in a real text, and the different options taken by the translator in each case. A small English-Spanish parallel corpus was built for this purpose, containing the first chapter of a British novel published in 1995 and its Spanish translation. All N + N structures in the

English part of the test corpus were isolated and broadly classified according to semantic criteria. The Spanish equivalents were extracted for each case in order to determine the subtle patterns that relate specific meanings with their formal actualisation. The aim is to establish the degree of typicality of certain constructions for particular meanings in Spanish, with reference to the meanings expressed by noun modifiers in English.

2. SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC FUNCTIONS OF PREMODIFYING NOUNS IN ENGLISH

Premodifying nouns are ubiquitous in English, only second to adjectives in their modifying function. They occur in all types of texts, in written and spoken discourse, and the frequency of use of these constructions is growing. “Nouns are the second most common type of noun premodifier in all registers occurring with particularly high frequencies in news and (to a lesser extent) academic prose.” (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan 1999: 589). English speakers make a profuse use of premodifying nouns because of their peculiar features with respect to single premodifying adjectives.

Firstly, premodifying nouns are extremely graphic in their characterization of nouns and can express a wide range of different relationships between the head and the modifier. Secondly, these structures are very short and constitute a good example of the economy of language. As a result, the meaning relationship is often not explicit and has to be inferred by the listener. This fact favours the occurrence of N + N structures in the news, where there is a need for brevity. And thirdly, “the use of noun modifiers is a productive feature of English” (Sinclair 1990: 102), making it possible to coin new ready-made combinations with any type of nouns for any specific purpose. It is precisely this flexibility that makes noun modifiers so attractive to English speakers.

As refers to the internal structure of nominal combinations, traditional grammars have long insisted on distinguishing between those cases where the first noun actually modifies the second (*milk carton, glass bottle*), and those other cases where the two nouns have become so closely associated that they form a compound, one single lexical unit, such as in *heart attack* or *cupboard*. Stress placement and orthographic conventions are strong indicators that help in determining whether one such combination has achieved the status of a compound or not. If the stress falls on the first noun, we are confronting a fully-fledged compound (*'heart attack*), whereas stress in the second noun indicates a modifier plus noun sequence (*glass 'bottle*). Similarly, two nouns written as a single word are easily recognised as compounds, such as *cupboard* or *seaweed*. Hyphenated nouns indicate that they are on the way of becoming compounds, and finally, nouns written as two separate words may be a modifier plus noun sequence or a compound, depending on its particular meaning. However, there is no clear boundary between the two categories and the division is in fact a cline.

I will not focus on the structure of these NPs, but on the meanings that may be conveyed by the combination of two nouns. With respect to the meaning relationships that may apply between the two nouns, “there are no differences between supposedly non-compound noun-noun combinations and the compound noun-noun combination.” (Warren 1978: 57). I will consider all the cases of N + N sequences written in two separate words, irrespective of the fact that they may or may not be compounds.

The type of meanings that may be conveyed by noun modifiers differ from the type meanings most central adjectives convey when they modify nouns. Taking into account, the basic distinction between descriptive and classifying modifiers in English (Warren 1984; Biber et al. 1999), noun modifiers are always classifying, that is, they do not generally describe a specific entity (*a tall man*), but rather classify it as belong to a

particular group (*an organisation man*). The two nouns being juxtaposed without any preposition in between leaves the relationship between them implicit to a great extent. Consequently, the addressee is required “to infer the intended logical relationship between the modifying noun and head noun.” (Biber et al. 1999: 590). Dozens of semantic relationships between N + N combinations have been put forward by different authors (Lees 1963; Warren 1984; Levi 1978; Novak 1996; Francis et al. 1998). In this study I have taken the classification put forward in Biber et al. (1999: 590-591) as a starting point, trying to limit the number of semantic groups to obtain a clearer picture of these structures and their translational correspondences in Spanish.

3. ENGLISH-SPANISH PARALLEL CORPUS: DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

I have compiled a small parallel test corpus of an English source text (ST) and its Spanish target text (TT) to shed light on the variety of possible translations of the ‘very’ English N+N construction. The corpus contains the first chapter of a novel published in 1995 in the United Kingdom by a successful British writer, David Lodge. The title of the novel is *Therapy*. The novel was published by Penguin, and its ISBN is 0-14-025358-0. The first chapter was scanned and stored electronically. It is a chunk of text containing a total of 6166 words. The Spanish translation of the novel was first published in March 1996 by the publishing house Anagrama (Barcelona) under the title of *Terapia*. A second edition of the same translation appeared in 2001. The second edition is the one employed in this study. The name of the translator is Francesc Roca, and the Spanish translation is registered under ISBN: 84-339-6681-2. The Spanish TT was equally scanned and stored in electronic format. It contains 6987 words.

Our English sample corpus contained 53 instances of N + N combinations (1 every 116 words, approximately), which were all classified according to eight broad semantic

criteria. Some of these instances could have been considered as part of more than one semantic category, but a choice was made in all cases according to the most prominent meaning found. Here are the semantic criteria found with the corresponding Spanish translations:

3.1. Purpose

The English sample corpus contained 13 instances of N + N combinations where an underlying semantic relationship of purpose could be identified. The Spanish translations of these instances are listed below from higher to lower frequency:

- *de*-phrase (4 instances): *cricket ground - campo de criquet; reception area - sala de espera.*
- prepositional phrase (PP) with *para* (4 instances): *hospital supplies - suministros para el hospital; TV script - guión para television.*
- explicitation (2 instances): *adventure playground - un estupendo terreno de juegos, lleno de aventuras; potty training - cuándo empezaste a decir que necesitabas ir al retrete.*
- single adjective (1 instance): *breathing exercises - ejercicios respiratorios.*
- PP (1 instance): *stage directions - indicaciones acerca de los decorados.*
- compound (1 instance): *utilities lift - montacargas.*

3.2. Specialization

There were 12 instances of N + N combinations with an underlying meaning of specialization and the corresponding translational options found in Spanish are:

- *de*-phrase (8 instances): *book writers – escritores de libros; hospital staff – personal del hospital.*

- adjective (2 instances): *swing doors – puertas basculantes.*
- PP with *para* (1 instance): *form letters – formularios para que te hagas socio.*
- verb phrase (1 instance): *a video recording – grabar en video.*

3.3. Place

A total of 9 instances of noun combinations presented some type of locative relationship and the corresponding Spanish translations are the following:

- *de*-phrase (6 instances): *the London flat – el piso de Londres; the club-house bar – el bar del club.*
- PP with *en* (1 instance): *a hip operation – una operación en la cadera.*
- PP with *a* (1 instance): *open heart surgery – operación a corazón abierto.*
- relative clause (1 instance): *theatre lift – los ascensores que van a los quirófanos.*

3.4. Time

Our English corpus contained 6 instances of this semantic relationship between the two nouns in the NP and the Spanish translations are the following:

- *de*-phrase (4 instances): *Monday morning – mañana del lunes; one winter morning – una mañana de invierno.*
- single adjective (1 instance): *night sweats – sudores nocturnos.*
- compound (1 instance): *the rush hour – la hora punta.*

3.5. Material

The English sample corpus contained 4 instances of nominal combinations in which the first noun indicates the material the second noun is made of. Invariably, in

Spanish the translations are *de*-phrases: *plastic valve – cánula de plástico; glass eyes – ojos de cristal.*

3.6. Part-whole

The 4 instances of part-whole meaning also correspond to *de*-phrases in Spanish: *the toilet bowl – la taza del retrete; the fridge door – la puerta de la nevera.*

3.7. Institutions

All 3 occurrences of N + N combinations that referred to specific institutions were translated into Spanish by means of *de*-phrases: *the BUPA hospital – el hospital de la BUPA; the Dream Channel – el Canal de los Sueños.*

3.8. Content

In two cases the semantic relationship between the two nouns was one of content, and the Spanish translations were equally *de*-phrases: *the cathode-ray tube – el tubo de rayos catódicos; milk cartons – cartones de leche.*

4. RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

The previous analysis confirms that *de*-phrases are the most common options employed by our Spanish translator for conveying the different semantic relationships in English N + N combinations. *De*-phrases are ever-present in Spanish and present a wide range of possible meaning relationships associated to them, paralleling to some extent N + N constructions in English. *De*-phrases are the only options found in four out of eight semantic categories, and they are by far the most common ones in all other categories as well. *De*-phrases amount to almost 70% of all translations of N + N constructions.

The data state that whenever an English noun combination involves a semantic relationship of material, content, institution or part-whole, the most natural translation equivalent in Spanish will correspond to a *de*-phrase: *a silk tie – una corbata de seda*; *my jacket pocket – el bolsillo de mi chaqueta*. This particular resource seems to be associated rather naturally to these meanings by native speakers of Spanish, and thus constitutes a functional-semantic equivalent of the corresponding unit in English. In other words, there is a high degree of typicality in the use of *de*-phrases for expressing these meanings in Spanish.

The analysis has revealed that the expression of time and place relationships in Spanish is also closely linked to *de*-phrases, although in these cases there are also a few examples of other resources, such as classifying adjectives, PPs or relative clauses. All of these options tend to make the relationship more explicit in the TT. The example of the relative clause in particular (*theatre lift – los ascensores que van a los quirófanos*) is a clear attempt on the part of the translator to decode the implicit relationship between the two nouns in English.

When there is a relationship of purpose between the two nouns in English, there are several different options found in Spanish. Phrases headed by the prepositions *de* and *para* occur in equal proportion. The main semantic function of *para* is in fact purpose, which explains the translator's option as an attempt to make the implicit relationship explicit in the TT. And finally, the category labelled as specialization also comprises an overwhelming majority of *de*-phrases as translation equivalents of English nominal combinations. A variety of other marginal resources are employed in the first two categories, such as classifying adjectives, compounds or PPs, and this indicates that there is a lower degree of typicality between *de*-phrases and the relationships of purpose or specialization than in the other semantic categories.

In conclusion, the study shows that meaning has to be taken into account as the main factor in the translation of N + N combinations from English into Spanish, since there are distinct patterns according to the different meanings. But meaning “is subjective, it is anthropocentric, it reflects predominant cultural concerns and culture-specific modes of social interaction as much as any objective features of the world ‘as such’.” (Wierzbicka 1988: 2). Even though this paper is based on a relatively small number of instances, the analysis exemplifies the way in which different semantic functions may be implicit in one and the same grammatical structure. Revealing these semantic functions is of paramount importance in the field of translation.

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