

The trouble with small words: What we may overlook in L2 translation

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The challenges of specialised translation are commonly associated with terminology, domain knowledge and genre conventions. Yet its success also depends on less conspicuous linguistic choices. Articles, prepositions, pronouns and conjunctions rarely attract the same attention, although the patterns in which they occur also contribute to textual fit.

Translations produced by trainees are typically assessed one by one, which makes broader regularities across texts much harder to detect. A purpose-built learner translation corpus allows isolated instances to be viewed as part of recurring tendencies and to be compared with relevant translated and non-translated varieties of the target language. This comparative perspective also suggests that not every divergence is a learner problem: some patterns may reflect L1 influence, while others may occur more generally in translated language.

My study draws on a corpus of Polish-to-English trainee translations of legal texts to examine what becomes visible at this broader scale. Patterns in the use of such small words as *the*, *of* and *it* point to issues of textual fit that may be overlooked when attention is focused primarily on terminology and other specialised features. Further examples suggest that conventional target-language phrases may be less likely to emerge when they lack a direct source-language trigger.

The talk will consider how learner corpora can inform our understanding of cross-linguistic competence and support L2 translation teaching and learning. A further consideration is the growing use of AI-assisted translation and revision in trainee work. This raises difficult pedagogical questions about how reliably the final text reflects developing competence and which features may have been shaped by technological assistance.