

T.M.I. (too much information)? - the pitfalls of translating Spanish football language into English.

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Abstract: This paper seeks to analyze the specific difficulties inherent in the translation of technical terminology related to football from Spanish into English, a task made all the problematic by the abundance of both false and pseudo Anglicisms in the associated terminology in Spanish. The text makes specific reference to the localization issues involved in the experience of translating into English the contents of the webpage of Real Madrid Football Club during season 2013-2014, and analyses a series of translational difficulties that need to be solved when producing a variety of different technical documents such as match reports, player interviews, institutional statements, press releases and even detailed medical reports on the condition of certain players. The field of sports translation is one in constant demand and is currently undergoing significant growth in an increasingly globalized sporting world where clubs are acutely aware of the need for quality localization of their ‘product’ in order to consolidate and expand their corporate identity. Despite the increasing demand for this type of technical translation (and a brief search on the Internet will confirm the growing tendency to offer this highly specialized type of translation service), comparatively little research attention has been paid to the specific characteristics of this type of translation work and, therefore, the proposed paper seeks to bridge this gap by analyzing a practical case of technical sporting translation and discussing some of the linguistic and cultural issues encountered in the process. Despite the increasing demand for this type of technical translation, there are still relatively few specialists and little research on the topic of sports translation.

Introduction

The field of sports translation is one in constant demand and is currently undergoing significant growth in an increasingly globalized sporting world where clubs are acutely aware of the need for quality localization of their ‘product’ in order to consolidate and expand their corporate identity. Despite the increasing demand for this type of technical translation (and a brief search on the Internet will confirm the growing tendency to offer this highly specialized type of translation service), there are still relatively few specialists in this field and very little research into this type of translation work. Indeed, comparatively little research attention has been paid to the topic of sports translation in general and there is a notable lack of any significant analysis of its specific characteristics.¹ Therefore, the present study seeks to bridge this gap by analyzing a practical case of technical sporting translation and discussing some of the linguistic and cultural issues encountered in the process.

¹ The only published article we have thus far been able to find on the topic is an online article entitled “Football is coming home” and written by the Brazilian journalist and translator Luciano Monteiro. The full reference for this text appears in the bibliography.

In the following pages, we propose to offer a summary of the issues involved in the experience of translating into English the contents of the webpage of Real Madrid Football Club during season 2013-2014. In this sense, the text seeks to analyze some of the specific difficulties inherent in the translation of technical terminology related to football from Spanish into English for such a major localization project. One of the main characteristics is that the translators involved were expected to produce a variety of different technical documents such as match reports, player interviews, institutional statements, press releases and even detailed medical reports on the condition of players.

In general terms, perhaps the major textual differences between both cultures and, therefore, one of the most notable translational issues observed in the process of analyzing this question and producing this paper involves the notable disparity between Spanish and English football terminology in terms of the sheer quantity of the information provided by the original Spanish text (e.g. the habitual reference to the geographical origins of both players, coaches and referees along with the corresponding '*gentilicio*'), which also tends to provide an abundance of technical information which is neither common nor appropriate in the English equivalent.

Another issue which conditions this kind of project is that much of the translation work is frequently performed under a great deal of pressure and the match reports have to be translated consecutively as news feeds are provided throughout the game and have to be translated in real time. These time constraints placed on the translator mean that those working on such a project must possess considerable previous knowledge of the formal and informal terminology of this field in both languages as there is very little time to search for lexicographical assistance and precious little of this assistance to be found in any case, despite the enormous media presence of this sport. An additional complication was introduced by the fact that some texts were written in real time by club journalists who are also football fans, but other texts such as club history and player profiles were outsourced and were factually incorrect on some occasions.

In overall terms, mastery of this kind of technical vocabulary requires years of passive knowledge, constant updating and this kind of technical translation can only be successfully performed by a translator who is also a football fan (fortunately not too rare a combination). Indeed, one of the major difficulties inherent in this type of translation work lies in the notably different journalistic conventions of football terminology² in both cultures and the difficulty of reproducing standard slang and footballing clichés between the two languages. Another question which arises from this type of localization project is linked to the commercial pressure to establish references in English which are somewhat unnatural and by no means the established term e.g. the use of the term "the Whites" to refer to Real Madrid and the demand for standard nicknames for players and colloquialisms related to the club history to be literally transferred into English.

Having highlighted some of the major practical issues and constraints that condition this type of localization project, we will now conduct a brief analysis of the cultural problems inherent in translating this type of specialized text and a review of some of the solutions adopted. In this sense, what follows is a breakdown of the main textual problems and the major cultural differences that translators need to consider in football translation:

² Fortunately, there was no dilemma about deciding whether to use American or British English as the language of football is predominantly that spoken in the UK and, therefore, the reference points for style and terminology were the football sections of the BBC and *The Guardian*.

1. Geographical origins of players, coaches and referees

In Spanish journalism, there is a traditional tendency to constantly refer to the geographical origins of players, coaches and referees by using the corresponding '*gentilicio*' such as '*malagueño*', '*madrileño*', etc. This specific cultural reference either has to be omitted or simplified to cater for the shared knowledge one can assume of English speaking readers. For example, Xabi Alonso is from Tolosa in Gipuzkoa and is thus referred to as '*el centrocampista tolosarra*'. However, as this precise and specific geographical reference to a small location in the Basque Country would be virtually meaningless and certainly irrelevant to an English-speaking readership, the 'Basque midfielder' would be a perfectly acceptable equivalence in the case of this very well known international player

2. Detailed medical information

Although major institutions such as Real Madrid publish detailed information and updates on the injuries of their players, essentially this is T.M.I. (Too Much Information) for the vast majority of English speaking readers who lack the requisite medical background or interest necessary to understand such detailed references. Nevertheless, these precise terminological references are entirely appropriate in the football culture of Spain where the press releases of Real Madrid and F.C Barcelona (and to a lesser extent their rivals in *La Liga*) are eagerly awaited by the nation's sporting press (there are two daily sports paper published in Madrid and a further two appear every day in Barcelona)³ and lapped up by their readers who are used to speculating on these questions in bars and workplaces all around the country. However, this kind of lavishly detailed medical report is intensely culture bound and invariably goes into somewhat excessive detail, thus making little sense for those accustomed to UK football culture. It is evident that Spanish football fans are used to being informed using a certain kind of detailed medical terminology which one is unlikely to find in the British sporting press and would in any case be entirely inappropriate in texts aimed at their English-speaking counterparts. An example of this tendency would be the following press release about the medical condition of the German international Sami Khedira who had just undergone an operation on his right knee (which would have been more than enough information for most English speaking fans):

'El jugador Sami Khedira será intervenido hoy tras el diagnóstico inicial de rotura del ligamento colateral medial y del ligamento cruzado anterior de la rodilla derecha'

As the club insisted that the complete information should be translated, the following faithful translation was produced which rings rather unnatural to English-speaking ears used to football journalism:

'The Real Madrid player Sami Khedira has undergone an operation today after the initial diagnosis of a break in the medial collateral ligament of his right knee'

³ Spain's most widely read daily newspaper is *Marca*, a pro-Real Madrid publication that is based in the nation's capital.

3. General verbosity and circumlocution

Spanish football texts tend to display a tendency to verbosity which needs to be drastically reduced in English in order to make the text sound as natural as possible. Some characteristic elements include a constant inclination towards circumlocutions and a fondness for the use of a whole raft of synonyms for key concepts such as the ball, the referee and the goalkeeper. In particular, institutional statements sound rather odd when rendered into as there is a quasi-political paraphernalia surrounding the organizational structure of major football clubs in Spain which is inexistent in the UK. Occasionally, the circumlocution is pretentious but quite evident. Thus, for example, when a player ‘recuperates his verticality’ he merely gets back up on his feet again. However, on other occasions the translation of certain culturally specific references requires a thorough knowledge of Spanish football history and journalistic terminology to make any sense of the original, as is the case of this short phrase from the biographical information about a former Real Madrid player:

“tras abandonar Chamartín, se enfundó la elástica del conjunto ché”

Literally, this means that, after leaving Chamartín (the name of the Madrid neighbourhood where the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium is located and the former name for the stadium itself) the player in question ‘squeezed into the elastic of the “che” set’. However, in context, what this actually means that the player in question joined Valencia Football Club. Essentially, these texts abound in the kind of dense, culturally specific references that we have just seen and require a profound and balanced knowledge of football language and history in both cultures

4. Standard nicknames

Certain players who have become major figures in the club’s history such as Puskas and Di Stefano have nicknames in Spanish which the club wanted to be recreated in translation, even if they have an alternative nickname in English. In the case of the Argentinian footballing legend, his nickname (‘the blonde arrow’) is not all well known in English and ‘merely’ runs the risk of sounding silly. However, in the case of the great Hungarian player Ferenc Puskas, the translation of his nickname becomes rather more problematic as in Spain he was known as ‘*cañoncito pum pum*’ (as well as ‘*Pancho*’), which in English would lead to the absurd ‘little cannon boom boom’ rather than his standard English moniker of ‘the galloping Major’. In this case, the direct translation would sound doubly absurd and confusing to English speaking readers who would generally be aware of his standard nickname in English. Another important decision in this respect had to be made about the team’s standard Spanish nickname of ‘*los blancos*’ (or ‘*los merengues*’)⁴, which was rendered as ‘the Whites’ at the insistence of the club in order to consolidate this brand name, despite the fact that this is not at all a standard term to refer to the club in the English speaking world. A possible option would have been to leave the term as ‘*los blancos*’ as we readily use ‘*la Liga*’ and

⁴ Literally, ‘the merengues’, which would sound quite absurd in English and was discreetly dropped in favour of the more sober ‘the Whites’.

the ‘*Clásico*’⁵ but this was a question of corporate identity for the club and was translated directly.

5. Pseudo Anglicisms

Another potential pitfall faced by anybody who attempts to translate Spanish football terminology into English is the historical tendency to reproduce pseudo Anglicisms in Spanish football texts, a fact which is inextricably linked to the Anglophone origins of the game in Spain. Although there are undoubtedly some genuine equivalences to be found in Spanish football Anglicisms (e.g. ‘*córner*’ or ‘*hat trick*’) there are several other rather baffling terms such as ‘*el míster*’, ‘*hacer un pressing*’, ‘*un killer*’, ‘*un crack*’ and ‘*los pross*’ which sound extremely odd to English speakers and are certainly not equivalent to their use in Spanish football parlance. Therefore, the task of the translator is to recognize which of the Anglicisms are genuinely applicable in English and which of them are merely pseudo Anglicisms that will make no sense to English-speaking readers. As noted previously, this type of translational operation is made all the more complicated by the frequently hurried circumstances in which these texts are generated, and this points inevitably to the conclusion that this kind of translation can only be successfully performed by a football fan proficient in both languages and both football cultures.

6. Standardization of proper names and the non-universality of club names

The establishment of conventional spelling of team names is also a potentially problematic question. Thus, for example, the team known as ‘*Atlético de Madrid*’ in Spain find their name written in up to three different ways in the UK media: ‘*Atlético de Madrid*’, ‘*Atletico de Madrid*’ and ‘*Atletico Madrid*’. Translators also need to know that the names of certain major European football clubs such as Sporting Lisbon, Inter Milan and AC Milan do not entirely coincide in English and Spanish and different footballing cultures have different traditions when talking about these teams e.g. in Spain ‘*el Milan*’ (written without an accent, unlike the name of the city) is the standard way of referring to them team who are usually referred to in English as ‘AC Milan’ to avoid confusion with their rivals in the same city, Inter Milan (who, by the same token, are usually referred to in Spain as ‘*el Inter*’ whereas in English they habitually receive their full title). Likewise, Spanish football terminology tends to refer to ‘Manchester United’ simply as ‘*el Manchester*’ and in English football there is no such team known simply as ‘Manchester’. This apparently banal point can lead to a serious mistranslation in the hands of a translator unversed in football in both languages,

7. Names of positions

For the football translator, the problem essentially lies in the fact that these names and even these tactical concepts are by no means always universal and are instead subject to frequent changes in fashion as new tactics evolve. Translators need to know

⁵ This loan could have been further justified if we bear in mind that it is also standard to refer to the Italian national team as the ‘*azzurri*’ and the French national team as ‘*les Bleus*’.

the current terminology and its modern equivalence in English e.g. the position habitually known in Spain as *'media punta'* is, strictly speaking, an 'attacking midfielder' in English but this is also often referred to as playing 'in the hole', which is the currently fashionable term. Another important consideration in this question is that Spanish football language also tends to possess far more synonyms and colourful alternatives for the different positions on the pitch e.g. a goalkeeper can be described as *'portero'*, *'cancerbero'*, *'guardameta'*, *'custodio de los palos'*, etc. Although English does some synonyms for goalkeeper, they tend to be excessively colloquial ('goalie') or thoroughly old-fashioned and redolent of a bygone era ('capable custodian').

8. Number conventions

Finally, it must also be remembered that the use of numbers does not fully coincide between the two (football) cultures⁶ and that non-fans would be unlikely to know about this fundamental difference in footballing journalism. Thus, Chelsea might win a game 5-0 away but not 0-5 as in Spanish, both in the written and spoken form. Another practical example of this disparity can be found in the use of ordinal numbers to refer to matches (i.e. the 27th game of the season') are faithfully recorded in Spanish texts but seem rather superfluous in English

Conclusions

As stated previously, this type of specialized translation is in constant and growing demand in an increasingly globalized sporting world where clubs are acutely aware of the need for quality localization of their 'product' in order to consolidate and expand their corporate identity. Essentially, the translation of these texts requires profound schematic (as well as systemic) knowledge and, when not performed by somebody who is genuinely conversant in footballing parlance in both languages (i.e. a fan), they tend to degenerate into pure translationese. This translational task is made all the more problematic by the abundance of both false and pseudo Anglicisms in the associated terminology in Spanish and, therefore, translators in this field must be intimately acquainted with the differing journalistic conventions of football terminology in both cultures and this kind of localization project can only be successfully carried out if the translators are also genuine fans who are as interested in football as they are in language.

⁶ Mistranslations involving numbers are a common source of mistakes between English and Spanish due to the fact that both language use almost entirely opposite criteria involving the use of decimal points and commas and, therefore, a figure such as 3,650 in English would be read as 3.650 by a Spanish reader with the ensuing problems that this can entail for the translation of financial and scientific documents.

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