

ON THE LANGUAGE OF WEATHER FORECASTS

The language of the newspaper weather forecast is a linguistically and glottodidactically interesting register for two reasons. In the first place, owing to certain specific characteristics of this register, the weather forecast can be used as teaching material in dealing with different problems in the process of the acquisition of the English language. Secondly, the mastery of the weather forecast register as a whole is an important contribution to competence in what Malinowski and subsequently many other linguists referred to as the phatic aspect of communication.

I would like to point out some specific characteristics of this particular register on the stylistic, syntactic and lexical levels.

The most obvious characteristic of the weather forecast style in British daily papers is conciseness: a text which, compared to other sections, gets relatively little space in the paper conveys a relatively large amount of information on a number of areas — temperatures, precipitation, winds in particular regions of Britain and at particular times of the day, the outlook for the next two days, the situation on the previous day, maritime reports, lighting-up time, the rising and setting of the sun and moon, high tides, weather conditions abroad and so on.

This concentration of information is achieved in three basic ways: by means of well-presented tables and synoptic charts, through the frequent use of abbreviations and, most notably, by ellipsis of the body of the text. Linguistically, of these three means the last one — ellipsis — is of particular concern. It consists in leaving out those parts of the text which would not carry a great semantic weight, that is, whose function would be primarily grammatical. Here are two random weather forecast paragraphs exemplifying this process of ellipsis:

- (1) Central, S, E, central N England, Midlands, Channel Is: Rain clearing. Bright intervals developing but also showers, some heavy and prolonged. Wind variable, light. Max temp 16c (61f).¹
- (2) Birmingham: Dry and cool. Sunny start then partly cloudy.

In these short extracts, which are stylistically typical of weather forecasts in any daily paper, every single word carries some information. Translated into »ordinary«, unreduced language, the above text would look like this, for example:

- (1a) In Central, Southern, Eastern, central Northern England, the Midlands and the Channel Islands, the rain will clear. Some bright intervals will develop, but showers are also likely to occur, some of which may be heavy

¹ For the weather forecast register the following British newspapers have been utilized: The Times, the Daily Express, the Guardian, Today.

and prolonged. There will be a variable and light wind. The maximum temperature will be 16 degrees Centigrade or 61 degree Fahrenheit.

(2a) In Birmingham it will be dry and cool. There will be a sunny start, but then it will be partly cloudy.

It is immediately obvious that, as opposed to the reduced, elliptical style of the newspaper weather forecast, the »ordinary«, unreduced style apart from the so-called lexical expressions also contains grammatical expressions such as prepositions, articles, auxiliary and modal verbs and sentence connectors.

In this connection it should be noted that in a newspaper weather report, as a rule, time and modality are expressed by lexical, rather than grammatical means. As to the former concept, it is typically implied by adverbial (3, 4) or adjectival (5) expressions of deictic character. These expressions instead of the verbal tense locate the propositional content of the weather forecast sentences in time:

- (3) Temperatures at midday *yesterday*: Belfast f 1355 ...
(Rather than: Yesterday ... the temperatures *were* ...)
- (4) Outlook for *tomorrow* and Thursday: continuing changeable and rather cool.
(Rather than: Tomorrow and on Thursday the weather *will be* changeable and rather cool.)
- (5) *Today's* weather: cool, rain or drizzle.
(Rather than: Today it *will be* cool and there may be some rain or drizzle.)

The same function is performed by nominal expressions such as *forecast* and *outlook* in the title or headings (as in 4), which by virtue of their semantic nature, signal futurity. At the same time, it must be observed, they also imply the modal meaning of predictability, which is no surprise, as the notion of futurity and modality are closely related.

It should be noted that in the language of the newspaper weather forecast the notion of modality is treated similarly to futurity. Modal verbs, which otherwise normally express the notion of modality, in this register tend to be left out; the expression of predictability and tentativeness tends to be limited to adverbial (6, 7) and nominal (8) expressions which are semantically similar to modal verbs:

- (6) Outbreaks of rain, *possibly* heavy.
(Rather than: There will be outbreaks of rain, which *may be* heavy.)
- (7) 28: Rather cloudy, *perhaps* a little rain or drizzle.
(Rather than: It will be rather cloudy and there *may be* a little rain or drizzle.)
- (8) Outlook: Warmer, brighter but *risk* of showers.
(Rather than: It will be warmer and brighter, but there *may be* some showers.)

In the newspaper weather forecast one will frequently come across some specific syntactic constructions, which, being different from the corresponding

Serbocroatian constructions, are interesting from the point of view of contrastive analysis. Therefore, the text of the weather forecast can be used as the basis for practising the procedure of transposition in the course of translation. Here are a few simple examples of weather forecast sentences which would require the application of this procedure in translating in either direction from one language into the other:

- (9) E: Visibility poor becoming good.
- (9a) SC: Vidljivost smanjena, s izgledima za poboljšanje.
- (10) E: Sea moderate becoming slight.
- (10a) SC: More umjereno do malo valovito.
- (11) E: Continuing changeable and rather cool.
- (11a) SC: I dalje promjenjivo i prohladno.
- (12) E: Rather cool with rain or drizzle at times.
- (12a) SC: Prohladno i povremeno kišovito.
- (13) E: Wind W (westerly) moderate.
- (13a) SC: Vjetar umjeren, zapadnoga smjera.

The differences between the English and Serbocroatian constructions in these examples can be accounted for as follows: the present participle of Serbocroatian verbs cannot perform the functions which the English present participles *becoming* and *continuing* have in examples 9—11, so that in Serbocroatian we must employ different constructions, such as those in 9a, 10a and 11a. As for the sentences 12 and 13, they are typical examples of the common situation in translation when one language requires pre-modification and the other post-modification or vice versa. It is important to note here that differences in syntactic constructions between the two languages are not specific to the weather forecast register; it is hard to imagine the translation of any text without resorting to the procedure of transposition. In any case, when analysing the register of weather forecasts, it is useful to draw attention to differences of this kind between the two languages.

Weather forecasts are also interesting from the lexical point of view. The vocabulary of newspaper weather forecasts is characterized by great informativeness, which results from the already discussed tendency towards conciseness, manifested in the elliptical nature of the style.

In the weather forecast, the foreign language learner will come across a wide range of words denoting elementary natural phenomena, such as weather, sun, moon, wind, sea and many others, as well as varied expressions describing the weather conditions, examples of which are countless:

- (14) Unsettled. Becoming cloudy with outbreaks of rain, clearing during the evening.
- (15) Cloudy with rain in places at first, brighter and mainly dry by late morning.
- (16) Warm at first but temperatures falling to near normal. Visibility moderate with fog patches becoming good.
- (17) Brighter, showery weather for a time tomorrow. A little warmer.
- (18) Continuing unsettled and becoming windy. Near normal temperatures.

Secondly, from the weather forecast one can learn the basic English meteorological expressions, some of which are particularly interesting from the point of view of Serbocroatian-English contrastive analysis, seeing that the corresponding Serbocroatian expressions tend to be translated into English by their false pairs. Thus the Serbocroatian word for the weatherman is «meteorolog», which tends to mislead the Serbocroatian speaker of English into using the inappropriate English word «meteorologist» for the weatherman. Similarly, the Serbocroatian expression for the weather forecast — «vremenska prognoza» — may mislead one into saying «weather prognosis» in English.

Thirdly, the weather forecast abounds in interesting degree expressions and their collocations, as can be seen from these typical weather forecast syntagmas:

rather cloudy; fairly cool, quite cold; a little warmer; somewhat warmer

In the weather forecast register one also comes across some useful quantifying expressions, like the ones in the following sentences:

- (19) *A little* light rain or drizzle at times, dying out.
- (20) *A few* bright spells, occasional showers.
- (21) Dry and bright . . . , *some* rain everywhere on Saturday.

Finally, dealing with the register of weather forecasts presupposes the mastery of locational and directional expressions exemplified in the following sentences:

- (22) Pressure will remain low *to the North* and high *to the South of the British Isles* and a frontal trough lying *through N England* will move *E into the continent*.
- (23) Wind *W (westerly)* to *NW (northwesterly)* light or moderate.
- (24) Wind *SW (southwesterly)* moderate to fresh locally strong to gale, veering *W (west)*.

Some hints for the use of the weather forecast register in class:

The elipsis found in the language of the British newspaper weather forecast, which, as has been shown by examples 3—8, is manifested, among other things, in a specific way of expressing futurity and modality, can be differently used in teaching for the practising of verbal tenses and modal auxiliaries. One of the possibilities of doing this is to take the text of the newspaper weather forecast as the basis for playing the role of the weatherman. In his imagined appearance on TV, the weatherman, whose role can be played by various pupils, would have to express the given information in a nonelliptical style, adapted to the medium of television. Conveyed through this other medium, the same message will be expressed in a different way, which not only allows for, but favours the grammaticalization rather than lexicalization of the notions of time and modality. In such an exercise the examples 3—8, for instance, could be modified in the way suggested in parentheses. Besides this exercise, an inventive teacher can find other ways of dealing

with these grammatical problems, using the text of the newspaper weather forecast as the basis.

In addition, weather forecasts can also be used for the acquisition and practising of the comparison of adjectives and adverbs. This can be done by comparing the weather conditions in different places or in the same place on different days or at different parts of the day, or by establishing the warmest, coldest, sunniest and wettest place in different regions on the basis of temperature charts. The particular type of exercise may vary from oral ones, such as playing the role of the weatherman, to different types of written exercises.

Lastly, as shown by the lexical analysis of this register, the weather forecast can be a useful teaching material for dealing with certain fields of foreign language vocabulary.

In summary, the following characteristics of the weather forecast register in British daily papers have been pointed out: conciseness, manifested by ellipsis and, in this connection, the tendency towards lexicalization, rather than grammaticalization; and, in many respects, interesting syntax and vocabulary.

Finally, an important point to note is that the language of the weather forecast as a whole is a useful register to master, at least passively, in view of the importance of this topic in the everyday usage of language for so-called phatic communication, that is, communication with the main function of establishing and maintaining social contact, rather than describing reality. The British find weather such an excellent topic for small talk.

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