

# Factors in Linguistic Interference: A Case Study in Translation\*

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## Abstract

*The paper presents the results of corpus-based research into linguistic interference in translations from L1 Czech into L2 English. Using the interlanguage model, the analysis focuses on three key factors in interference: poor reference materials, translators' generalisations of false hypotheses, and systemic-structural differences between the Czech and English languages. The examples analysed cover interference in lexis, word-formation, grammar and syntax.*

## 1. Introduction

The issue of linguistic interference is a factor in any translation, and when the translator is working from L1 into L2, interference from the L1 source text becomes a key element in the production of the L2 target text. The product of L1 – L2 translation will thus usually contain examples of what is colloquially termed 'translationese', i.e. a non-standard version of the target language that is to a greater or lesser extent affected by the source language. The objective of this paper is to analyse and discuss several features of this 'translationese' as exemplified in a selected corpus of translations from Czech into English. In all cases the translators were working from Czech, their language of habitual use, into English as a foreign language.

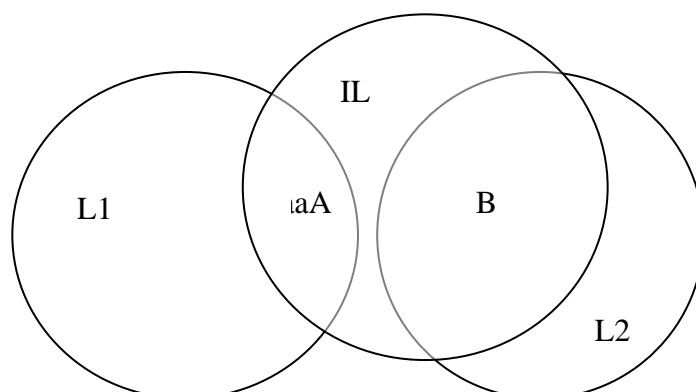
The corpus of texts subjected to analysis was extracted from the internet and contains approximately 50,000 words in both Czech and English. The chosen texts reflect the most common public use of English in the Czech Republic, i.e. communication with foreigners, especially in the travel industry, in service industries and in presentations aiming to attract investors. The texts were taken at random from web sites published on the internet by Czech cities, towns and regions. In the initial analysis, breaches of natural English usage were identified in the translations, and these errors were then compared with the corresponding places in the Czech source text to determine which of the errors are traceable to interference from the source language.

Many of the errors in the translations are not random phenomena; certain types of errors occur with such regularity that it has been possible to draw more general conclusions about the linguistic processes which underlie them. A suitable theoretical framework for dealing with this type of material is that of interlanguage (abbreviated to IL). This framework was first developed by Larry Selinker at the University of London in the early 1970s, and has since become a widely used and accepted concept in applied linguistics, especially in research into language acquisition. Briefly, the interlanguage theory states that learners' (or translators') imperfect foreign language production results in an intermediate language system – in effect a 'third language' – lying somewhere between two 'true' languages (the L1 and L2). It is this interlanguage which, when it occurs in translation, is sometimes known as 'translationese', and the specific Czech-English interlanguage dealt with here has also been wittily termed 'Czenglish' by Don Sparling. The majority of elements in the IL naturally

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stem from the foreign language (the proportion of L2 elements grows along with the proficiency of the translator or language learner), but L1 elements also occur (interference), in addition to other IL elements not directly related to the L1. The interlanguage theory can be demonstrated in Figure 1:



L1 = first language (Czech)  
 L2 = foreign language (English)  
 IL = interlanguage

A = interference in the IL  
 B = correct L2 production in the IL

Figure 1 *The interlanguage model*

The interlanguage concept is particularly useful in researching L1 – L2 translation because of its emphasis on the systemic nature of errors; the research presented in this paper shows that in many respects the Czech-English IL – though obviously more ‘fuzzy’ than the systems of ‘true’ languages – can be treated as a relatively stable language system which can often, through a contrastive analysis of Czech and English, be traced back to a number of fundamental differences between the systems of these two languages. An additional advantage of the interlanguage approach is its ability to reveal the processes which underlie the production of errors in L1 – L2 translation. This paper deals with three major factors which influence the formation of interlanguage. Firstly it will be shown how inadequate reference materials have led to a proliferation of common and repeated interference errors in lexis. Secondly, the paper describes how translators make generalisations from their own false hypotheses about the relationship between Czech and English. Finally, the paper will deal with selected systemic and structural differences between Czech and English in the areas of morphology, syntax and grammar, examining how these differences lead to recurring interference errors which can be seen as relatively stable features of the Czech-English interlanguage.

## 2. Inadequate Reference Materials

This factor plays a major part in causing lexical interference, which has been found to be particularly visible in two main types of errors: firstly, in cases when a semantic field is segmented in different ways by the two languages in question (see 2.1), and secondly, in cases when translators subconsciously seek exact syntactic equivalence between lexical items in the source text and the target text (2.2). In both cases, as will be seen, inadequate reference materials (i.e. usually dictionaries) play a key role.

## 2.1 Segmentation of the Semantic Field

The first case is the failure of translators to deal adequately with instances where a single Czech word has a wider range of referents than its various English equivalents, i.e. when the two languages segment a particular semantic field (conceptual field) by using differently structured lexical fields. Examples are given with suggested correct translations in parentheses:

- (1) *město bylo investorem i další dokončené výstavby v nových **domech***  
*\*the city invested in other apartment **houses** (the city also invested in the completion of new apartment blocks)*
- (2) *největší kulturní **dům** v republice*  
*\*the biggest **House** of Culture in the republic (the biggest cultural centre in the country)*

In examples (1) and (2), the Czech *dům* has a wider range of referents than the English lexical item *house* which has been incorrectly chosen; the English items *house – block – centre – building* cover the referents denoted by the Czech *dům* (other Czech lexical items covering this section of the conceptual field ‘dwelling, construction’ include *domek* and *budova*, generally expressing smaller and larger sizes respectively). Similar examples are as follows:

- (3) *stává se oblíbeným **cílem** turistů*  
*\*it has become a favourite **aim** for tourists (it has become a favourite destination for visitors)*

While *cíl* may cover both abstract and concrete meanings, English generally expresses these as *aim* and *destination* respectively.

- (4) *největší **podnik** regionu středních Čech Poldi Kladno*  
*\*Poldi Kladno, the largest **enterprise** in Central Bohemia (Poldi Kladno, the largest company in Central Bohemia)*

The Czech *podnik* denotes both a formally established *company* and any goal-driven human activity (i.e. *enterprise*).

- (5) *po výrazném poklesu nastává dynamický populační **rozvoj***  
*\*after a significant decline, dynamic population **development** begins (after a significant decline, the population has begun to grow rapidly)*

The Czech *rozvoj* expresses both qualitative and quantitative growth, which are denoted in English by *growth* and *development* respectively.

- (6) *město je stále **sídlem** největších průmyslových podniků regionu*  
*\*the town is still a **seat** of the biggest industrial enterprises of the region (the biggest industrial companies in the region are still based there / the town is still the home of [...])*

The English *seat* refers to the residence of aristocratic families or Church officials; when the context concerns companies or administrative organisations, alternatives such as *head office* or *headquarters* are used, or it is said that a company is *based* in a particular place.

It has already been stated that lexical errors are frequently traceable to the use of inadequate reference materials such as dictionaries. Although Czech-English dictionaries do in fact tend to list more than one suitable alternative for the Czech lexical items discussed in examples (1) – (6), the incorrect translations shown above (in addition to many more similar examples not listed here) seem to have become a relatively fixed part of the Czech-English interlanguage. There are two probable reasons why these errors have entered the IL. Firstly, there is often a lack of contextual information in dictionaries, which fail to guide their users to the word that is appropriate in a specific context. Secondly, it is usually the first word in a dictionary's list of alternatives that becomes firmly entrenched in the interlanguage, rather than the words that follow it; this suggests that learners and translators often tend to merely scan the relevant dictionary entries and settle on the first word that meets their eye. For example, in three commonly used mid-sized Czech-English dictionaries consulted, the equivalents of *sídlo* were listed as follows:

- *seat, domicile, establishment, quarters, place of business*
- *seat, quarters, domicile, residence, establishment, place of business*
- *seat, residence, headquarters*

It is probable that the listing of the relatively infrequent *seat* as the first item in the relevant dictionary entries (as well as the absence of the more suitable equivalents suggested above) has had an influence over the way in which the word is commonly misused in the interlanguage.

## 2.2 *Exact Syntactic Equivalence in Lexical Interference*

The second notable trend in lexical interference that is often at least partially connected with the quality and design of reference materials is the unconscious tendency of translators to seek exact syntactic equivalence between lexical items in the Czech source text and the English target text. If the Czech text expresses a concept by using a single word, translators frequently attempt to produce a single-word equivalent in English. Often this produces acceptable English, but frequent traces of this process are also visible in the IL in cases where natural English usage would require some form of phrasal structure. For example, the Czech *mládež* is often incorrectly translated as *youth*, whereas in fact the phrase *young people* is more commonly used (the word *youth* usually refers to a single young person and often has connotations of delinquency, or is used as a collective noun in context-specific collocations, such as *the youth of today* in *the youth of today have no manners*). Although this tendency to seek exact syntactic equivalence is undoubtedly rooted in psycholinguistic processes, commonly used dictionaries frequently exacerbate the problem by their over-reliance on single-word equivalents as the first item(s) listed in an entry. Two examples from the corpus will illustrate the issue:

- (7) *nejbližší okolí města*  
\**the nearest town environs (the area immediately around the town)*

- (8) *lety nad krásnou oblastí Krkonoš i do **okolí***  
\*flights above picturesque Krkonoše region and its **vicinity** (flights over the beautiful Krkonoše region and the surrounding area)

Here the Czech *okolí* is translated using inappropriately archaic or formal equivalents; *environs* and *vicinity* respectively. Predictably, the first translations of *okolí* listed by the three Czech-English dictionaries quoted above are these inaccurate attempts at single-word equivalents; all three dictionaries omit to mention that the Czech word in question is usually best translated with a phrasal structure such as *the surrounding area* or *the area around [...]*. Other examples of translators' tendency to seek single-word equivalents are the translation of *známý* as *known* rather than *well-known*, or of *mráz* as *frost* instead of *cold weather*, *sub-zero temperatures* etc.

### 3. Generalisation from False Hypotheses

Many examples of lexical interference found in the corpus, however, are clearly not due to inadequate reference materials, but instead are the result of another process which appears to be an important factor in the formation of the IL. In this process, translators make incorrect generalisations from their own false hypotheses of the relations between linguistic systems in Czech and English. This factor plays a key role in generating interference at the lexical level and in word-formation. Translators frequently search for regularity in translation processes where no such regularity actually exists, and they (probably unconsciously) create hypotheses governing such processes which they then apply in unsuitable situations.

#### 3.1 Lexical Generalisation: False Cognates

At the lexical level, this tendency to generalisation leads to the occurrence of false cognates, colloquially termed 'false friends'. In the corpus under investigation here, these false cognates are mistranslations of Czech lexical borrowings using English words which have a similar appearance to the Czech words but are not suitable translations. The 'false hypothesis' in this case could be expressed as follows: "*Lexical borrowings in Czech will regularly have a similar and valid equivalent in English*". In many cases this hypothesis produces acceptable English (e.g. *rezervace* = *reservation*, *subjektivní* = *subjective*), but in other cases it leads to the occurrence of false cognates. Usually the chosen word exists in English, but sometimes or always has a different meaning (e.g. *alej* ≠ *alley*, *areál* ≠ *area*, *expoziční* ≠ *exposition*, *objekt* ≠ *object*, etc.). In other cases, the problem is not caused by the meaning of the English word chosen, which is similar or identical to that of the Czech word, but by differences in Czech and English usage, as in the following examples:

- (9) *největší kulturní dům v **republice***  
\*the biggest House of Culture in the **republic** (the biggest cultural centre in the country)
- (10) *[...] bylo prohlášeno za **státní** přírodní rezervaci*  
\*it was declared a **state** preserved natural area (it was declared a national nature reserve)

In both of these examples, the words *republika* and *státní* (or the noun *stát*) correspond literally to the English *republic* and *state*, but natural English usage prefers other alternatives (*national, country*). A useful distinction can be drawn here between *qualitative errors* (i.e. literal non-equivalence, e.g. *areál* ≠ *area*) and *quantitative errors* (as in (9) and (10)), where the word chosen in the target language, though semantically equivalent to the source language word, occurs less frequently in the TL than the SL lexical item does in the source language.

### 3.2 Generalisation in Word-Formation

The tendency to generalise from false hypotheses also affects issues of word-formation in the IL. One area which is particularly affected by this type of interference is that of noun suffixes. For example, it is possible to hypothesise – falsely – that “*Transformation of the suffix of a Czech lexical borrowing will regularly produce a valid English equivalent*”. In many cases and contexts this transformational rule is valid, e.g. where *ekonomika* = *economics*, *politika* = *politics*, and *statistika* = *statistics*. However, translators commonly apply this transformation in cases where the rule is invalid, e.g.:

- (11) *jedna z největších zahraničních investic do energetiky*  
\*one of the biggest foreign investments in **energetics** (one of the biggest foreign investments in the energy industry)

Other examples of this process include *informatika* ≠ *\*informatics*, *anglistika* ≠ *\*anglistics*, and likewise *anglista* ≠ *\*Anglist* or *\*Anglicist*. In all of these cases, as in example (11), the generalisation of a false hypothesis produces non-existent words.

In the examples of mistranslated noun suffixes discussed above, it is clear that the translators are searching for a non-existent regularity in the translation process. They are seeking to simplify the diversity of the structural relations between the SL and the TL by regularly applying structural parallels that do actually exist between the two languages, even though these parallels are not applicable in all cases. The translators are in fact creating an independent IL system of word formation, not merely a collection of random, unrelated IL vocabulary.

## 4. Systemic and Structural Differences between Czech and English

The preceding examples (3.2) have touched on the systemic nature of interference in IL word-formation. Three-way contrastive analysis (SL, TL, IL) applied to the corpus demonstrates how systemic and structural factors, frequently rooted in typological differences between Czech and English, play a major role in producing linguistic interference on the morphological, syntactic and grammatical levels of the IL.

### 4.1 Morphological Systems

On the level of word-formation, the most notable cases of interference found in the corpus are those in which the Czech morphological system allows for a simpler and more

regular transformation of words into other parts of speech than is possible in English, especially the transformation of verbs into nouns and of nouns into adjectives.

Czech makes wide use of verbal noun forms produced by means of the suffixes [vowel + *ní*] or [vowel + *tí*]. This morphological feature exerts a strong influence in the IL, which often imitates or tries to approximate the Czech system by using the *-ing* form in cases where English would often avoid the gerund and instead use a ‘straight’ nominal form:

(12) [...] *se podařilo zachránit před zbouráním* [...] *rozhlednu na Studenci*  
\*the lookout tower at the Studenec was prevented from **demolishing** (the lookout tower at Studenec was saved from demolition)

(13) **vytlačení** *Indiánů*  
\*the **pushing back** of the Indians (the expulsion of the Indians)

(14) **pochování** *Bakuse do hrobu ve sněhu mívalo často pro občana, který jej představoval nemilé následky*  
\***burying** of Bakus into the grave in snow used to be very dangerous for the person who played him (the burial of Bacchus in the snow often had quite unpleasant consequences for the person who played him)

In all three cases, English prefers a ‘straight’ nominal form rather than the *-ing* form with which the translators have attempted to approximate the Czech verbal nouns. The tendency towards generalisation can be clearly seen in this feature of IL, as translators – unconsciously seeking regularity in language systems – tend to favour processes which they see as being ‘regular’, i.e. the transformation of English verbs into gerunds by the simple addition of the *-ing* suffix. However, whereas in Czech *zbourat* can be transformed into the verbal noun *zbourání*, in English the verb *demolish* becomes not \**the demolishing* but *the demolition*. There is no reliable ‘rule’ or indicator of whether the *-ing* morpheme or another morpheme will be used to carry out this transformation in English; the choice depends largely on usage, which is irregular and unpredictable. An additional problem is that English gerunds perform a somewhat different function to Czech verbal nouns, and are not a direct equivalent. (Another factor which may influence the IL overuse of gerunds is that of poor training: many teachers, when introducing their students to the English gerund, resort to somewhat shaky comparisons with Czech verbal noun forms in order to try and clarify the meaning of the *-ing* form, and these early experiences seem likely to have conditioned the translators’ inadequate understanding of the true usage of gerunds.)

Another area of morphology which causes considerable interference is that of the transformation of Czech nouns into adjectival forms. There is a marked tendency in the IL to prefer the type of visibly adjectival suffixes that are almost universally present in the Czech morphological system. Whereas Czech transforms the word *město* to *městský*, English uses functional shift (zero derivation) to transform the noun *city* into the adjectival form *city*. This salient feature of the English morphological system is under-represented in the IL: occasionally non-existent forms such as \**Praguian* or \**Ostravian* can be seen instead of the normal forms, *Prague* (adj.) and *Ostrava* (adj.), as translators seem reluctant to abandon the morphological clarity of the Czech original and use zero-derived forms. The following examples demonstrate the IL tendency to prefer visibly adjectival forms over more usual or natural zero-derived alternatives:

(15) *Městské muzeum (expoze historických loutek)*  
\*the **municipal** museum with expositions of puppets (the City Museum with exhibitions of historical puppets)

(16) *městský úřad*  
\***municipal** office (town / city hall)

The clearly adjectival *municipal*, though acceptable in some collocations (e.g. *municipal authorities*), is somewhat bureaucratic in style and falls into the category of quantitative errors.

(17) *výstavy akademických malířů*  
\*exhibitions of **academic** painters (exhibitions of Academy painters)

The word *academic* has negative connotations in this context and produces non-equivalence, implying that the painters' works are lifeless, formal and dry.

#### 4.2 Syntactic Systems

The morphological interference discussed in the preceding section is closely related to a key systemic (typological) difference between the Czech and English languages: whereas Czech is a broadly synthetic language and thus has a highly complex and largely unambiguous system of inflection, in English inflection is residual. One obvious consequence of the Czech system of inflection is the language's tendency to exhibit relatively free word order (carrying out a semantic function), in contrast to the fixed word order of English, which fulfils a grammatical function. The IL frequently preserves the word order of the source text in cases where the subject of a Czech clause is the focus of the utterance and is thus placed in final, emphatic position, while in English initial position is required for the subject:

(18) *více o bohaté historii kladenského průmyslu najdete na straně 10*  
\*more about the rich history of Kladno industry you will find on page 10 (you will find more about the rich history of Kladno's industry on page 10)

(19) *v roce 1735 byla otevřena latinská škola Carolina*  
\*in 1735 was opened Carolina, the Latin school (in 1735 the Latin school, Carolina, was opened)

(20) *k silným stránkám města patří: významná exponovaná poloha, [...]*  
\*to the strong aspects of the city belong: important exposed location, [...] (the city's strengths include its strategically important location, [...])

Another related syntactic pattern which is frequently transferred into the IL is the Czech structure *subject complement – verb (copula) – subject*, where English would again have to place the subject in initial position:



- (21) *pozoruhodné jsou některé skalné útvary*  
\*remarkable are several rock formations (there are several rock formations which are particularly remarkable)

Analogous examples include \*valuable is also the nature reserve, \*geologically interesting are also the sandstone rocks, and \*significant are the very favourable physical conditions.

#### 4.3 Grammatical Systems

Among the many elements of Czech grammar which cause interference in the Czech-English IL, there is one which is especially closely related to the language's system of inflection. Though the Czech case system does not generally play a significant role in linguistic interference, genitive structures frequently prove problematic. The versatility of Czech genitive structures cannot always be rendered by using *of*, which tends to result in a stilted style. One such genitive structure is that used in modification within noun phrases, namely *noun (head) + genitive noun or noun phrase (modifier)*:

- (22) *sdužení, které rozvíjí své aktivity v oblasti cestovního ruchu*  
\*an association operating **in the field of tourism** (an association working in the travel industry)
- (23) *významné území v rámci projektu ICBP*  
\*a considerable area **in framework of the ICBP project** (an important area within the ICBP project)
- (24) *ovládl celé území Krkonoš*  
\*he took over the whole **area of the mountains** (he took over the whole of the Krkonoše mountains)

From a functional perspective, the head in the Czech phrases (*oblast, rámeček, území*) is a superordinate (i.e. semantically a more general term) and is specified by the subordinate modifier (*cestovní ruch, projekt, Krkonoše*). In natural English usage, the superordinate head of the noun phrase is very often (though not always) redundant.

Another area in which the Czech use of genitive structures leaves a mark on the IL is in the frequent proliferation of nominal forms. This is a well-known issue in translation from e.g. French into English, and the Czech-English IL also shows traces of the way in which Czech can use the genitive to link together chains of two or more adjacent nouns. In the following examples, the IL is stilted, and natural English would generally prefer some kind of verbal structure or clause:

- (25) *kaple reálného gymnázia byla posledním místem pobytu lidických žen*  
\*the chapel of Kladno grammar school was the last **place of stay** for Lidice women (the chapel of Kladno grammar school was the last place where the women of Lidice stayed)

- (26) *výstavba severozápadní dráhy si vyžádala stavbu nádraží*  
*\*the construction of the north-west railway required the building of a railway station*  
*(the construction of the north-west railway meant that a railway station had to be built)*

It should be emphasised at this juncture that the presence of over-nominalisation in the Czech-English IL does not necessarily mean that Czech *per se* makes more widespread use of nominal (as opposed to verbal) structures than English does. In fact, the IL produced in translations from English into Czech also exhibits similar tendencies towards nominalisation, appropriating English nominal structures in cases where natural Czech usage would prefer verbal ones. This observation suggests that research into other interlanguages would probably reveal similar tendencies towards nominalisation; it has already been shown here that translators frequently fall into the trap of seeking exact syntactic equivalence, and thus it is possible to hypothesise that – due to psycholinguistic factors which lie outside the scope of this paper – syntactic structures are one aspect of language which is particularly resistant to change during the process of translation.

## **Conclusion**

This brief survey of selected factors in linguistic interference does not claim to be complete; it does, however, highlight the interdisciplinary approach which is required when researching issues of interlanguage and interference. The first factor presented here – inadequate reference materials – is largely sociolinguistic, depending as it does on translators' and language learners' external environment. On the other hand, the second factor – translators' over-generalisation of false hypotheses – lies within the domain of psycholinguistics with its emphasis on language users' neuro-linguistic processes. The third factor – systemic differences between languages – relies on techniques of contrastive and structural linguistics.

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