Cross-linguistic register studies: theoretical and methodological considerations
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What do we actually do when we analyze register-related features in multilingual corpora? Looked at from this perspective, register analysis appears to be a cover term for a wide range of different approaches to the study of text and discourse features yielding quite different findings. This paper aims at giving an overview of the different kinds of insight these approaches afford in the field of contrastive linguistics and translation studies.

Registers may be used quite simply as a way to structure usage-based contrastive comparisons controlled for register as a potentially confounding factor. Studies of this type provide frequency-based information on specific lexico-grammatical, textual or other contrastive phenomena. Translation-related studies also often control for both language contrasts and registers in order to determine specific properties of translation as exemplified by individual lexico-grammatical or other features. In both cases, the problem of comparability pertaining to system-based contrastive comparison also applies to usage-based, or more specifically, frequency-based comparisons. Different possibilities of dealing with this will be discussed in this paper. Regardless of whether only individual registers are contrasted or whether a comprehensive comparison of register variation is aimed for (see below), a proviso also needs to be made with respect to the representativeness not just of texts within a register but also – and this is a much harder problem – of registers assumed to represent the range of variation in the language under investigation. Highly differentiated languages such as English will make this task especially difficult, thus having an impact on the kind of claims to be made on the basis of the data.

Whereas in the case of register-controlled contrastive studies of the above type, register is a means to gain more insight into other linguistic features, in the following perspective this relation is reversed: here register is the main object of research and lexico-grammatical and other features serve as indicators to characterize registers. Here, the main goal is to make claims about registers, their contrasts as linguistic entities across languages and potentially also their role in translation.

The above contrastive approach can be extended in a first step to cover the contrasted register features more comprehensively by computing their frequencies of occurrence, thus allowing a contrastive characterization of the registers under investigation. In a departure from this feature-based approach, studies may compare registers on a more abstract level. This can be done inductively generalizing claims from concrete quantitative data as demonstrated by the multi-dimensional approach (Biber 1995). Alternatively, the abstract level may consist in concepts derived from a theory of register as, for instance, in the systemic-functional framework (Halliday & Hasan 1989, Matthiessen 1993).

Including translations adds a further complication to cross-linguistic register studies. In contrastive linguistics, translation corpora are used as data for analyzing contrasts in a given language pair assuming that contrasts can be identified by comparing source and target versions of a given linguistic feature (Johansson 2007). Translators, however, do not only react to contrasts (and in fact may deal with the contrasts in sometimes quite deliberate ways) but also to a range of other factors including understanding of the source text but also more general cultural differences etc. Taking contrasts into consideration can therefore be seen as a prerequisite for assessing the impact of these other factors (not least the requirements of the target language register into which the source text is translated).

Our discussion of these various approaches will be exemplified with results from our own research into the comparison of English and German registers covering a range of lexico-grammatical and textual features of different aspects of registers (e.g. Neumann forthcoming) drawing on the CroCo corpus (Hansen-Schirra et al. forthcoming) which includes originals and translations in eight different registers in English and German.

Studies of this type are shown to provide substantial knowledge on the role of registers in contrastive language pairs as well as on the impact of register on properties of translations.
References